

Fanning the Flames by midas_touch_of_angst

Series: [Fanning the Flames \[1\]](#)

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Characters: Axel (Stranger Things), Dottie (Stranger Things), Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Funshine (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mick (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers, obligatory robin mention, she'd be in here more but s3 isn't out yet so

Relationships: Dustin Henderson & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Dustin Henderson & Lucas Sinclair, Dustin Henderson & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Kali Prasad, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Lucas Sinclair, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers & Joyce Byers, Jonathan Byers & Steve Harrington, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Kali Prasad & Lucas Sinclair, Kali Prasad & Nancy Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Steve Harrington & Nancy Wheeler, The Party - Relationship

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Summary:

The town of Hawkins is thrown into turmoil when five children are kidnapped and dragged by their ankles out of town. Joyce leaves with her oldest son and the Police Chief to find them, her past having finally come back to haunt her. Meanwhile, the kids attempt an

escape; unfortunately, they have to escape without Will. They team up with another mysterious runaway, who rarely speaks and even more rarely gives them answers, to try and find out how to rescue their friend, why this organization wanted them, and why these teenage arsonists seem to know who they are.

Stranger Things Party in ASOUE Universe AU.

Rated Teen and Up for Swearing and Threats of Violence.

1. Kidnapping is what you do to Children

CHAPTER ONE

Kidnapping is what you do to Children

On a list of the worst things that ever happened to Mike on his birthday, getting kidnapped was probably among the top three.

His thirteenth birthday had started pretty normally. His Mother, Karen, had given him her present in the morning- a new, blank notebook for his D&D nights. His little sister, Holly, had wished him a Happy Birthday and shown him the drawing that she'd made for him, and then he'd gone off to school, which was relatively normal. After classes, he'd gone to Will's house to study, and then his friend's older brother Jonathan offered to drive them back.

On the way out, Will's Mom, Joyce, stopped him for a second to remind him how to stay safe.

"You won't take things from strangers?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Or go anywhere with them?"

"Yes, Mom."

"And you know what to do if someone breaks in?"

"Hide in the closet and call the police." Will recited, looking a bit less annoyed than Mike would've expected him to be. If *his* Mom made him go through this everytime he went somewhere, he'd probably have lost it.

"And if there's a fire?"

"Mom, I *know*, can I just go now?"

Joyce smiled, gave Will a hug, and then said, "Alright. Have fun!"

As they jumped into the backseat, waiting for Jonathan to grab his keys, Mike said, "Your Mom's... really protective."

"She just..." Will said carefully. "Just wants to make sure I'm safe, you know?"

Mike just bit his lip and nodded, as Jonathan jumped in. "Alright, kids, what are you going to do tonight?" he asked as he started the car.

"Illegal shit." Mike said, and Will jumped.

Jonathan shot him a smirk, and said, "Don't get caught."

"We're not-" Will began, but he trailed off as he noticed that Mike and Jonathan were laughing.

They'd gone back to Mike's house, and Jonathan drove to his Night Job, and soon Dustin and Lucas both arrived. They played in the basement for a while, until Karen peered down to tell them that she was taking Holly to her own sleepover with some friends from school, and then she and Mike's Father, Ted, were going on a date night and wouldn't be back until very late. The boys nodded, told her they'd go to bed at a reasonable time, and then they waited until they heard the door slam to rush up to Mike's room, running through his collection of old videos to watch.

By the time Dustin and Lucas finished fighting over the one they wanted and finally settled on a compromise, they heard a tapping on the window, and Mike rushed over to open it, letting Max inside.

"So your parents wouldn't let you come over?" he asked as she tossed her hair over her shoulder.

"No. Didn't think I should be spending the night with a bunch of *boys*." Max rolled her eyes, handing Mike a wrapped present and sitting down inbetween Lucas and Will. "But I snuck out the window. They won't check my room until, like, noon tomorrow, so I'll be fine for the night. Got an extra bag?"

Mike nodded. "Always do. Sleep inbetween the window and the bed and Mom won't even notice you're here."

Max grinned. "So, what are we doing?"

"Watching bad movies to make fun of them." Dustin said, as he put in the VHS tape.

"Alright, what're we ripping apart now?"

"It's called *Zombies in the Snow*." Lucas explained.

Mike glanced towards Will, realizing that he looked a bit uncomfortable. "Something wrong, Will?"

Will stammered. "W-w-well, I... my Mom doesn't like me watching this movie."

"So you don't tell her." Max said. "Simple as that."

Will flinched, and Mike remembered that he wasn't as good at lying to parents as he and Max were. "Uh, do you know why she doesn't want you watching it?"

"I... I think my Dad liked it..."

Oh.

Oh.

"Uh, if you want a different movie-" Dustin began.

Will shook his head. "It's fine. It's fine, really. Let's just watch."

So they started the movie, and spent the next two hours joking about it. They got a bit bored towards the end, because there were only so many times you could say "Wow, nice acting." or "Why are there subtitles if it's already in English?" or "They're singing *again* goddamnit!" before getting a little tired.

By the time the credits were rolling, they weren't in the mood for another video, and Will still looked a bit uncomfortable. Finally,

Dustin said, "Well, we've got some other movies. We can stay up late, Mike's parents are gonna be... how long?"

Mike shrugged. "They're usually out pretty late. Don't come back until I'm asleep. We might have all night."

"I dunno, I'm kinda movied-out." Max shrugged, leaning over on Lucas's shoulder, which caused the boy to blush and glance to the ground.

"We could play more D&D." Will suggested.

"Or we could dig out your Mom's secret stash of romance novels again." Lucas suggested.

Mike instantly turned red. "*Hell* no. I don't want to have that crap in my mind again."

"But we read them in funny voices!"

"That doesn't make it less *weird*!"

"I have an idea." Max said, a mischievous tone coming into her voice.

"Yeah?" Mike asked, glancing over.

She gave him a playful smirk and said, "Let's go in your sister's room."

Mike's heart skipped a beat, and he said, "Uh, Holly's room isn't that interesting. Mostly just kids' toys and shit."

"Your *other* sister."

They were silent for a second, and then Mike said, "Uh... you know we don't go in there. No one's gone in there since..."

He'd never been in it himself. He'd only been two when she... when she'd disappeared. Just climbed out her window in the middle of the night and vanished. He didn't even remember her, and his parents never talked about her- he'd only found out that he *had* another sister when one of his teachers had mentioned something offhandedly, and

Mike had been brave enough to ask his Mom. “Well, she vanished,” Karen had said slowly, “When she was six. And she never came back.”

Mike had stared at her, very confused; he’d thought for as long as he could remember that he was an only child. “What was her name?”

Instead of answering, Karen had just told him to finish his homework and walked away.

“Do you think it’s a haunted room?” Dustin asked, suddenly excited. “Like, do you think she died and her ghost is still there?”

“Dude!” Lucas hissed.

Mike, however, just shrugged and stood up. “Why not? Anyone know how to pick a lock?”

Max leapt to her feet, beaming. “I do!”

As they started to leave, Mike glanced back at Will, who was holding back. “Will?”

“Are you sure we’re allowed to do this?”

“We’re not.” Mike said. “But nobody’ll know. Don’t worry. Nothing’s gonna happen.”

“Hurry up.” Mike said, leaning against the wall and starting to feel pretty antsy.

“I’m *trying*!” Max huffed, still playing with the hairpin. “Nobody’s opened this door in eleven years.”

“Do you think we’ll get possessed?” Dustin asked, still hanging onto the ghost theory. “Which one of us do you think is the most likely to get possessed?”

“First of all, nobody’s gonna get possessed.” Lucas said. “Second, it’d be Max. She’s the strongest, ghost’s gonna want some muscle if it’s

gonna kill people.”

“I vote Will.” Max said, as she was getting close to unlocking the door.

“Why me?” Will asked.

“Just seem like the type.”

“Nobody’s getting possessed anyway.” Mike said, tapping his foot. “My sister’s not dead, I don’t think, she just ran away.”

“My Dad says she was kidnapped.” Lucas said.

“My Mom thinks so, too.” Will muttered. “Freaked out, Jonathan says when she found out a kid vanished just before we moved in she, like, flipped.”

“My Mom thinks she was abducted by aliens,” Dustin shrugged, “But to each their own-”

“We shouldn’t have done this.” Mike groaned. “Fuck it, Max, just-”

“Too late.” she said, as the door creaked open.

They all stared ahead, seeing only a dark room, and finally Will pushed forwards, walking in and flicking on the light. They all walked in, staring.

The room must have once been bright pink, but the paint had long since faded. A small, white bed was in front of the window, a quilt spread over it as if it had just been made. There was a second window, with a white trunk underneath that had more dust piled on top than Mike had ever seen before. A dresser with a mirror was pushed into the corner, dusty dolls littering the surface. An unlit lamp was in the corner, along with a second desk filled with childrens’ books. A corkboard of photos was in front of it, but it was hard to see from where they were.

“This is surreal.” Lucas muttered, stepping onto the blue carpet and wandering over towards the window.

“Yeah, this *is* kinda creepy.” Max admitted, moving towards the mirror.

Mike, meanwhile, wandered towards the corkboard, looking at the photos, a fascination spreading across his face.

That was his *sister*.

It hit him right then that he’d never seen her before. She had brown hair, quite a bit lighter than his black, and in the photos of this little six-year-old, she mostly had her hair pulled back in a braid or ponytail. She had bright blue eyes, and a bit sharper of a face than he did, but she had his same nose. And she had photos with their parents, photos dressed as a princess, first-day-of-school pictures, hasty scribbles on napkins she must have liked, photos of her with some red-haired girl she must’ve been friends with... and, right in the middle, a picture of her, holding a baby.

“Is that you?” Will asked, and Mike jumped to see that his friend was right next to him.

He turned back to the picture, studying it. She had her hair falling over her shoulders, only just brushed back so that the infant’s face was visible. She had an uncomfortable-looking dress on, probably picked just for photos. She wasn’t looking at the camera, instead opting to just be staring down at the baby, her eyes wide with wonder. He was asleep, but the splash of freckles across his nose was, well, recognizable. It was definitely him. He’d forgotten that she’d once been a part of his life, that he must’ve known her once, that she’d *met* him, that his parents had two children running around the house long before Holly was born.

“Yeah, I guess.” he finally said, looking at the books. They were normal things you’d expect a six-year-old to have- *Goodnight Moon*, *The Littlest Elf*, all that jazz. Meanwhile, Dustin moved to the trunk, managing to open it, and coughing up a storm when all the dust blew up into his face. The rest of the Party wandered over, disappointed to find that the trunk was empty.

“This is dumb, we should go.” Mike said, suddenly feeling very guilty about going through his sister’s stuff.

“Come on, there might be stuff under the bed-” Dustin began.

Then they heard what sounded like a howl outside the window.

They froze, and then rushed towards the glass, peering through to look outside.

“What was that?” Dustin asked.

“That sounded like a wolf.” Will observed.

Lucas bit his lip. “It was probably nothing. There’s probably nothing out there.”

“If there’s nothing out there,” Mike said, not knowing at all that his choice of words would change their entire future, “What was that noise?”

They were all silent for a bit, and then Max said, “Come on, dorks. Let’s go watch another bad movie.”

They left the room slowly, and Mike took his time closing the door, staring back into the room his sister once lived in.

He wondered whatever happened to her.

“I’m telling you, it’s all a writing thing.” Dustin argued.

“No, the reason the movie’s stupid is because nobody could deliver the dialogue, not because of the writing.” Max rolled her eyes, hugging her knees under her borrowed sleeping bag.

“It’s the plot, not the writing.” Will said. “I mean, nobody would ever make those decisions, right?”

“The cinematography was cool.” Lucas shrugged.

“Guys, seriously,” Mike said, turning off the lamp, still in a bad mood from their little adventure, “If my Mom comes home and we’re still awake...”

“She won’t, though.” Dustin said.

“Dustin!”

“It’s *true*!”

“I would like to get some sleep.” Will muttered. “I’m gonna get a headstart on homework tomorrow, make sure I don’t have anything to do Sunday-”

They suddenly heard what sounded like a snap.

They paused, glancing towards the window. It sounded like a branch had broken from the tree in the yard.

“The hell...?” Lucas muttered.

Mike sat up in bed, peering towards the outside. “It looks like there’s something in my tree.” he said.

“What is it?” Max started to crawl out from her bag, moving to look out the window.

Suddenly, something hit Mike. “Max... did we lock the window after we let you in?”

Max didn’t answer, because she didn’t need to.

At that moment, the window flew open, and someone burst in.

Will was the only one who got out of Mike’s room.

Max was too close to the window, she’d been caught fast. Mike was grabbed from behind when someone else had gotten in, and Lucas and Dustin had rushed forward to help their friends, only to get overpowered themselves. Will had started forwards to help, but before Mike was dragged out the window, he screamed, “*Run!*”

Will managed to get out the door, rushing down to the kitchen, his legs feeling heavy and his head buzzing. He ran for the phone,

flipping it in his hands by accident. As he kept trying to correct it, to punch in the right numbers, he just felt a dark feeling in the pit of his stomach. Like this was something he'd been fearing for his entire life, even if he didn't know it, even if he thought his Mom was just being overprotective when she told him how to keep himself safe...

Finally he heard the voice of the police station operator. "What's your emergency?"

"I'm Will Byers," he said quickly, "I'm at the Wheeler house, we're being kidnapped, *please help us*."

Then he felt arms around him, and he was dragged away from the phone. By the time it crashed to the floor, he'd already been dragged away.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, some notes:

- While elements of the TV Series will make it including The Incomplete History book and DEFINITELY the spyglass- VFD is heavily based on what's revealed about them in later books, aka I get to dunk on this cult for God knows how many chapters which will be fun.

- Based off of this gifset that I made a while ago lol:
<https://whencartoonsruletheworld.tumblr.com/post/173359798377/>

- What year does this take place in? Buddy I wish I knew.

- Hope y'all like this! :D

~ Midas

2. Joyce goes into Panic Mode

CHAPTER TWO

Joyce goes into Panic Mode

This wasn't supposed to happen in Hawkins.

The last real problem the town had was the disappearance of that Wheeler girl, and discounting that, twenty years before had two buildings burn down in a freak accident. Hawkins was one of the safest places in the world. Five kids didn't just get *kidnapped*.

But, apparently, something did happen. The Police arrived at the Wheeler house to find it empty, and when they received a call saying that a suspicious car was leaving town- suspicious in that there seemed to be distant shouts from inside- they followed that all night, eventually losing it in the pursuit.

So, the only thing they could do was call the parents. Try to figure out what had happened. They were really dreading that, though. None of the Officers wanted to have to tell a parent that their child had gone missing.

Though, to be honest, they didn't expect Joyce Byers to be the one, out of all the parents, to raise the most hell.

"Do you want me to pick up Will?"

Joyce glanced over at Jonathan from the fridge, where she was digging to find leftovers from the night before. Jonathan was sitting on the counter and cleaning the windows, his camera next to him- he was planning to take Will out for the day, so he could photograph and Will could draw in the field, but they weren't going until noon.

"No, it's okay, I'll pick him up before work." Joyce said. "I've got some time, the store's opening late today-"

"It's really not a problem," Jonathan shrugged. "I've got nothing else to do today."

"You don't have homework?"

"Finished it last night."

"I don't know, Jonathan, I think I'd be able to-"

They were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"I'll get it." Joyce said, since she was closest, and she moved over, opening the door and looking up.

When she saw that a police officer was there, she felt her heart drop to the floor.

"Ms. Byers?"

Joyce glanced behind her, to see Jonathan slowly stand up, looking just as worried as she felt. "Y-yes? I'm sorry, what... what's happening?"

The officer paused for a moment, and then said, "We... we need you to come to the station."

"Is something wrong?" *Please don't say it, please don't say it...*

"It's about your son."

No.

"My... my son? Will?"

"What's happening?" Jonathan moved closer, looking up at the Officer. "What about Will?"

Please don't say it...

"We're afraid he's been kidnapped."

Joyce really hadn't expected all her worst fears to come true today.

She and Jonathan were sitting in the waiting area of the small station, and she knew that other parents were being interviewed, too; the Sinclairs were in with one officer, the Wheelers with another, and Ms. Henderson had gone in sometime before now. The Hargroves were there, too, though Joyce didn't remember Will saying if Max had been sleeping over, too.

When they were finally called in, Joyce and Jonathan sat in front of Chief Hopper's desk, and Joyce instantly said, "What *happened*?"

Hopper glanced over at her, and before he could say anything, Jonathan added, "The guy out there said that Will's been kidnapped. Who... who took my brother?"

"We don't know-"

"You don't *know*?" Joyce said.

"We just wanted to ask you some questions that might help us find them." Hopper said, and once the Byers calmed down enough, he continued, "Now, we got a call from the Wheeler residence last night. Your son just said they were being kidnapped before the line went dead-"

"He's been missing *all night*?" Joyce interrupted. "Why are you only telling us *now*?"

"Joyce-"

"My *son* was kidnapped and you didn't think to tell me?" Joyce said.

"By the time we arrived at the house, they were already gone." Hopper explained as fast as he could. "But we spotted a black car leaving town and pursued that until we realized it was gone."

"So you *lost them*?"

"We've reached out to the surrounding cities, they're going to report what they-"

"They're not going to report *shit!*" Joyce yelled.

"Mom!" Jonathan jumped.

Joyce paused enough for Hopper to say, "We just need to ask some questions."

"Fine. Fine." Joyce put her head in her hands, still trying to hold herself together. "What do you want to know?"

"Firstly, where were you last night?"

"Do you seriously think that *we-*"

"We just want to know."

Joyce sighed. "I was at home. There all night."

"I had a shift at the movie theater." Jonathan said. "Then I went home."

"And the last time you saw Will?"

"I dropped him off at the house." Jonathan said. "And Mom was home when we left."

"Is there anyone you know that would *want* to kidnap him?"

Both of them were deathly silent.

Hopper glanced between them, and then said, "Listen. It's alright, you can say whatever you're thinking about. We need to know so we can cover all of our bases."

Joyce kept her mouth shut, but Jonathan said, "My... Mom, could Dad...?"

She was silent for a little while, and then she said, "I mean... it's possible."

"Their Father?" Hopper asked.

"My... my... yes, their father. Lonnie. But I left when Will was just a

baby, he wouldn't... wouldn't know who he was, Lonnie wouldn't recognize him, probably wouldn't know where we are."

"Do you know where he is now?"

Joyce shook her head.

"Is there anything else you know that might help us?"

Jonathan shook his head. Joyce, still, kept her mouth shut.

As they left the Station, Jonathan said, "Mom, what are we gonna do?" When she didn't respond, instead staring after a passing car, he said, "Mom?"

She slowly turned to him, and she said, "Pack a suitcase."

"What?"

"Pack a suitcase. I'm going to ask some questions of my own, and then we're leaving."

"Leaving?"

"To find Will."

"Mom, we can't just--"

"Go home and pack." Joyce said, a bit more forcefully. "And I'll be back soon."

Hopper honestly couldn't believe what was happening.

Nothing this serious ever happened in Hawkins, and everyone was buzzing. People stopped in all day, asking Flo if there were any updates, if it was true that five kids got kidnapped, if they had any leads. But nobody had witnessed anything that had happened that night, except for the old woman who'd called about the car, though she couldn't tell them much.

None of the parents knew anything useful, either. The Sinclairs weren't sure of anyone who'd want to kidnap their son, and Lucas's sister was too shaken up to answer very many questions. Claudia Henderson was hysterical, but also had no idea of any leads, and the Wheelers were useless as always, though when Hopper brought up the possibility of this being connected to their daughter, they'd seemed almost angry at the suggestion. Max's mother and stepfather had been brought in late, as they'd only discovered their daughter missing early in the morning and deduced where she must have been. While her mother, Susan, was incredibly upset, her stepfather, Neil, seemed almost angry at Max for getting into that situation, and after cursing a lot about it, suggested that her biological father may have abducted her, though Hopper doubted that. He apparently lived all the way across the country, and Hopper couldn't see what he would have wanted with Max's friends, too; also, according to Susan, Max adored her father, so Hopper figured that if he wanted to abduct her, he wouldn't have to resort to breaking into a house he probably wouldn't have known she was in and dragging her out. He asked to talk to her stepbrother, too, but apparently he was away at some kind of boarding school.

The person who was bothering Hopper most, currently, was Joyce Byers. She seemed to know something, something she wasn't telling them, which didn't make sense. He knew Joyce- they'd known each other during their teenage years, when she'd moved in with her parents, and even though she vanished before College, she'd moved back in soon after Will was born- and he knew she wasn't involved in this; she would *die* for her sons, there's no way she'd willingly allow him to get kidnapped, or help in any way, especially if other children were involved.

But she was clearly hiding something. And Hopper didn't know what.

But, well, he did know one thing. He was going to have to do a couple of follow-up questions.

Several towns away, a building set on fire.

The gang cheered as the smoke billowed higher, laughter erupting at

the sight of the destruction. Well, most of them were cheering and clapping; a few stood off to the side, looking vaguely concerned. And up ahead of the rest of the group, two more teenagers were laughing and holding more matches in their hands, threatening to drop them as they spun across the grass.

“You’re sure there was nobody innocent inside?” Another teenager called out, her voice raised slightly over the laughs.

“None of them are fucking innocent.” The second teen girl laughed, though after she saw her friend’s expression, she softened slightly and said, “Chill out. They’re *fine*. We’re just throwing them off our trail, aren’t we?”

The rest of the group cheered, too, and the teen boy held out a hand for the girl. “Care for a dance?”

The girl smirked, tossed the match over her shoulder at the burning building, and took his hand. They laughed and danced, and he twirled her around, their bodies silhouetted against the fire behind them.

When they heard the alarms sounding, the one girl in the back said, “We better go. Don’t wanna get caught.”

“Ugh, those fuckers always ruin our fun.” The dancing girl said, tossing her ponytail back over her shoulder. “Alright, team, let’s move out.”

Right before they left, the girl stopped, right before they would turn a bend and lose sight of the building. People were already going in, going to try and stop the fire, try to save the building. They’d be too late.

Good.

The girl flipped off the building, and said, “Little gift from Nancy Wheeler, bitches!”

3. Max bites her Kidnappers

CHAPTER THREE

Max bites her Kidnappers

It was her first mission, and he made sure to let her know.

“Don’t mess this up.” he said in his stern, dark voice.

She bit her lip and nodded. She couldn’t fail. If she failed, she’d be punished. And if she was *caught*... well, it would be much, much worse.

“Now, remember.” he said, as the others around them slowed the vehicle to a stop, and she pulled her arms over her knees for some kind of comfort, “We’re going in and out. You remember what we’re looking for?” She nodded. “Good. Then you know what to do.”

She did. She knew what to do. She’d been trained all her life for this. She’d been trained all her life to do just what he was asking of her. What *they needed* from her.

“I hope you understand that if you fail, the superiors will not be happy. Not with you.”

She knew full well.

“Now, do as you’re told, and maybe your apprenticeship can finally be over.”

She shut her eyes, grabbing onto the hem of her shirt, wondering if he knew what she was planning. He couldn’t. He couldn’t know. She’d never said it out loud, never written it down. But, still, she was scared. She was scared of what he could know, he’d always told her that he knew everything, that the adults knew everything, what if he knew what was in her mind...

She just had to be brave. She had to be brave right now, and then it

would all be over.

“Do you understand?”

She sighed, staring at the wall of the van, as she whispered, “Yes, Papa.”

The car drove all night, but none of the kids could sleep.

When they got tired of screaming, they sat on the floor, pulling shit out of their pockets- thank *God* none of them had changed into pajamas yet- and pooling their supplies, trying to find something to help them get out. Unfortunately, none of them were inventors, and Max’s hairpins weren’t working on the car doors.

“What do you think they’re gonna do to us?” Max asked worriedly, reaching to grab Mike’s hand.

“They’re gonna cut us up and sell our organs.” Dustin said matter-of-factly.

“No they’re *not*.” Lucas said.

“Maybe they’ll ransom us.” Max suggested blankly.

“My Mom hasn’t got much money.” Will said.

“My parents might be worried.” Mike muttered. “After my sister...”

They were silent again, and then they heard the car slide to a stop.

“Shit!” Dustin yelled, scrambling to shove all of his stuff back into his pockets. Everyone followed suite soon afterwards.

“What are we gonna do?” Max asked, panicking.

“Okay, no matter what happens,” Mike said, drawing everyone’s attention to him, “We stick together. Don’t let them separate us.”

They nodded, and then the door opened.

A man bent down, looking them in the eyes, and they all stared, confused at why he didn't look too threatening. "Are you children alright?" He asked carefully, which only served to confuse the kids even more.

"Who are you?" Will asked, fear flickering in his voice.

"Don't be worried. This was just a normal initiation." the man said, holding out his hand. "Come with me, and we'll explain everything to you."

"Initiation?" Max asked, raising an eyebrow. "What is this, some kind of cult?"

"We'll explain everything-"

"And *fuck no*, we're not going with you." Max added. "We just got *kidnapped*, you little *bitch*."

"Max..." Mike said, starting to feel that pissing these people off was probably a bad idea.

"Where *are* we?"

"If you come with-"

At that moment, Max launched herself out of the car and tackled the man. Lucas jumped out after her, while the other three boys just started screaming in complete confusion.

Dustin leapt up next, thinking maybe they should run out, but they heard more yells outside, from other adults they didn't recognize; how many people were out there? He stood still for a second, moving his arms out instinctively, as if to block whoever was out there from Mike and Will, but before they could decide that, yes, they *did* want to help Max, two more adults showed up at the door, and said, "Alright, kids, come on out."

"What's going on?" Dustin asked, as he heard Max let out another curse.

"Just *move*."

The boys glanced to each other, and then, slowly, they headed out, Will and Mike each gripping onto Dustin, none of the boys wanting to let go of each other.

And as they looked around, trying not to notice the adults slowly grab their shoulders, they did manage to see Max being held back by two men, kicking and screeching, as another adult said, "You're a bit old to be *biting* people!"

Lucas was also being held back by an adult, looking worriedly between Max and the other boys. "Let us go!" he started yelling. "Leave us alone!"

"God, we haven't had this difficult of an orientation since Ives." one of the women behind them muttered.

"Well, that's what happens when you grab five at once." her associate replied.

"Do you think we wouldn't have had added security to go through if we went one at a time?"

While Mike thought it might be helpful to eavesdrop on said conversation, his attention was drawn from this by when one of the adults ordered, "Split these kids up. This one's going to need more convincing."

"What? No!" Will was the earliest to realize what had just been said, and he started yelling, "No! Don't split us up!"

Mike tried to headcount the adults- there had to be at least six, maybe ten; he didn't know how many were behind them. They were all glancing to each other, probably considering. Finally, one of the women said, "We'll be splitting them up for travel anyway. We can't have her *biting* them, too."

"No! Max!" Dustin yelled, and Mike joined in. "No! Stop it!"

But the adults clearly didn't care, as the children were dragged into a nearby building, and Mike, Will and Dustin were thrown into one room, with Lucas and Max in another. The adults didn't bother staying with them, instead rushing out as soon as the kids were

inside, saying something about “Getting the right Volunteer for this.” Dustin instantly rushed to the door, pulling at the lock, as they heard Max still screaming swear words from several rooms away.

Mike scanned the room, as Will rushed to the window, trying to pull it open; it seemed to be stuck. Inside the room with them was a long table with four chairs, and there was a painting with a girl holding a bandaged puppy on the wall. There seemed to be some kind of tea set on top of the table, and there was a single closet in the corner; otherwise, the room was empty.

“Who the hell are these people? What’s going on?” Dustin asked, after abandoning the door and sinking to the ground. “Shit, shit, *shit...*”

“Okay, okay, we need a plan...” Will muttered, turning back around. “Mom said... *fuck*, she didn’t say what to do if they actually got me out of the house... she just said to go to an adult, but all the adults are *with* them...”

“Okay, try to break the window with a chair.” Mike said. “Then... shit, we can’t leave Max and Lucas...”

“We’ll circle around the back, and break their window.” Will suggested.

“The adults’ll be outside.” Dustin said. “They’ll catch us.”

“We need some kind of a weapon.” Mike said. “Check the closet.”

Will was closest, so he ran over and opened the doors. “It’s just a book...” he mumbled.

Mike and Dustin moved over anyway, peering down. It seemed to be some old, worn book, and they thought the title might be *An Incomplete History of...* well, the rest of it had been covered by spilled ink.

Dustin reached for it first, but then they all heard yelling outside the building, and they rushed to the window, trying to see what was going on.

“It sounds like an argument.” Dustin said.

“Maybe they’re fighting over us?” Will suggested.

“Okay, okay...” Mike muttered. “Okay, that might be a good distraction. Did Max ever show either of you two how to pick a lock?”

While Dustin shook his head, Will said, “No, but my Mom did.”

“How does your Mom-”

“She says she stole a lot of cars as a teenager. Does anyone have a pin?”

They reached into their pockets, thinking that one of them had an extra hairpin from the car, only to hear something that sounded a lot worse than yelling.

They heard a gunshot.

Max was pounding and screaming at the door for only a few moments, before she dug into her pockets, looking for her hairpin, only to freeze when she realized she didn’t have it.

“I’ll look in mine.” Lucas offered quickly. “It must’ve gotten mixed up in the car. Keep banging on the door while I work.”

She was about to, when she noticed something odd. “That tea set.” she said, looking closely at it.

“What about it?” asked her friend, who was, as promised, digging through his pockets.

“There’s something wrong.” Max mumbled, moving towards the table, kicking aside a chair in order to inspect it. “Something’s missing.”

“Is that important?”

"Might be. Maybe it's an escape room. For Mike's birthday."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You remember Jennifer Hayes? Her older brother had a super elaborate party for his Eighteenth, they surprised him halfway across the country with a scavenger hunt. Maybe Mike's parents paid some guys to pretend to kidnap us so we could escape."

"Do you actually think that," Lucas asked, "Or are you coping?"

"I just feel like there's something important here." Max said. "But I've only seen tea sets when my Mom made me sit in for company, I don't know them very well."

"Well, then, use this-" Lucas held out the desired hairpin for her, as he walked over, "And I'll figure it out. Erica has tea parties sometimes with her friends when I have to babysit."

Max rushed to the door, her bright red hair bouncing behind her, and she started picking the lock, cursing whenever her fingers fumbled. Lucas, meanwhile, said, "There's obviously a teapot, uh, there's two cups- there are four chairs, maybe there should be five?"

"I think I've almost got it."

"Wait, where's the su-"

That was when the shot rang out.

Max froze, her hand just over the knob, as Lucas whipped around, too, both their trains of thought broken.

"What the..." Max began.

Lucas, meanwhile, rushed to the door. "Will! Mike! Dustin!" he called, panicking. "Are you okay?"

"You think that was them?" Max asked, eyes widening. "You think they're actually gonna..."

"Mike! Dustin! Will! Dustin!"

They eventually heard a faint reply. “Lucas? Lucas!”

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t know-!”

There was a smash, and Max and Lucas whipped around, eyes wide.

Something had crashed through the window, and landed on the floor.

That something had started a fire.

Within seconds, the floor had lit, and Max screamed as the fire started to spread. She knelt down, finished her lockpicking, grabbed her hairpin, and kicked the door open. Her and Lucas rushed out, as Lucas yelled, “Where are you?”

“What’s happening? What just happened?” Mike called.

“There’s a fire!” Lucas yelled, as Max found the door the sounds were coming from and got to work. “A fire! We have to *get out!*”

The lock was a lot easier to pick than the last one, and as the door opened, Max said, “Come on! Let’s move!”

4. Firefighter training starts Very Early

CHAPTER FOUR

Firefighter training starts Very Early

“Fuck!” Dustin yelled, as they found the front door locked. “Fuck, fuck-”

“I can handle- shit!” Max grabbed the door handle, only to jump back, screaming and waving her hand.

“What happened?” Lucas asked.

“It’s too hot. There must be a fire on the other side.”

“Shit, shit, shit!” Dustin yelled.

Will glanced behind them, seeing smoke started to emerge from the rooms they’d just abandoned. The fire would spread fast, and they’d get caught up in it if they didn’t *move*.

“We’re gonna die.” Mike muttered, eyes wide. “We’re gonna fucking die here...”

“We’re not gonna *die*.” Lucas said insistently. “We’ll do... we’ll...”

Will looked between the kids again, thinking hard. Though most people wouldn’t know it by looking at them, he was the oldest of the group- he’d been born in late March, and the others were born later that year. He guessed that meant he was in charge, he was the adult in this situation. He’d never been the Adult before, but if they were on their own, he guessed that meant it was time to step up.

“We’re going out the back.” Will said, and everyone jumped, looking to him. “Try to duck under the smoke, crawl if it spreads too much. If the door in the back can’t be opened, we break a window. Max, you go in front in case we need to pick a lock. Lucas, go with her and hold her hand.”

“What?”

“If the smoke gets too thick, we won’t be able to see each other. Dustin, Mike, grab onto me.”

Mike and Lucas glanced to each other, before nodding.

“Alright, let’s try to find the back exit. We have no idea where we are, but we’re going to make it out.” Will said, as bravely as he could.

It was too easy.

The second the matches were lit, and the adults distracted by the fight, she could slip in through the window. The fire was already there, but she could weave through it. She’d been trained to. She’d been burned often enough to know how to avoid the fire. She moved to the closet, right where the men said it would be, and she opened the doors, ducking under the thick smoke, seeing the book on the floor. That book was her main target, and she knew it. So she grabbed it and tossed it into the flames as fast as she could. She watched to make sure it was burning before she started back towards the window. There were more things she had to burn for them, other things she had to *steal* for them, in different rooms. She had to get rid of everything they hated, destroy everything they needed her to destroy, take anything they needed her to take, and then, maybe if they didn’t need her anymore...

But before she could even reach the windowsill, she heard shouts from outside, and she paused to listen.

“Keep your heads down! The smoke’s coming our way!”

She paused, turning, thinking that she saw silhouettes of other children moving through the hall. She slowly watched as they moved- there had to be at least four, maybe five. She hadn’t been this close to someone her age since... ever.

“We’ll find a way out.” one of them was saying. “We’re gonna get out and we’re gonna go home.”

Home?

She glanced towards the window, and then ran, dancing between the fire and sliding out of the door. The kids were up ahead now, their backs to her. They hadn't even heard her.

We're gonna get out.

Time for a change of plan.

Slowly, she started moving forwards, following their shadows as the smoke filtered behind them.

"How big is this building?" Max asked worriedly, keeping her voice low as they turned yet another bend.

"It can't be much farther. It didn't look very big from the outside." Will said.

They'd been wandering for several minutes, trying their best to avoid smoke and flames, which seemed to be spreading farther. They hadn't run into any adults yet, and they weren't sure if that was a good or bad thing, but they had sometimes heard voices calling out, "Is anyone there? Are you okay?" They didn't respond, didn't want their kidnappers helping them out.

They turned another bend, and immediately jumped back, as the hall was completely filled with smoke.

"Fuck!" Lucas screeched.

"Okay, okay, we can do this." Will said. "We can do this. Everyone stay low, crawl if you need to. We've been going back for a long time, the way out has got to be this way. Everyone stick together, let's go."

They ducked down and ran, then, trying to ignore the heat blasting from all sides, the flickering of flames in the corner of their eyes, and the dark feeling in their stomachs that something was going to go horribly wrong. Will kept himself close to the back, trailing just slightly behind Dustin and Mike, in case something happened behind

them.

The others never really thought of him as the baby of the group or anything, but they definitely didn't think he was the strongest- that would be Max. And he knew that he wasn't the leader or anything- that was Mike. Heck, he wasn't even the smartest or the most skilled; Dustin got top marks in every class, and Lucas could shoot a rock from a mile away if he had a decent slingshot. But he was the only one who was keeping sane right now, and he was the oldest, and he had to protect them. He'd do anything for his friends, and he was sure that they knew that. And right now, that meant he had to take charge.

They turned another bend, and everyone cried in relief when they saw a window, clearly showing the outside. They didn't even care that this area was much too hot to be free of fire, they just ran to the door. Max reached for the knob, only to flinch back again. "Not as hot as the last one, but..." she said.

"Okay, here's what we have to do." Mike said, and everyone looked to him; his mind was working overtime, they could tell, and he started fiddling with his jacket as he thought. "We've gotta all throw our weight against it. Crash it out."

There were definitely better ways to knock down a door, but none of them were exactly experts.

"What if there's fire on the other side?" Lucas asked.

"We don't know that." Mike said.

"But we know there's fire in here." Will finished. He moved to the window, too, glancing out. He saw what seemed to be a parking lot of some kind, and a forest beyond that, but most of it was obscured by smoke, but the smoke seemed to be coming from their direction. "It seems safe for now."

They looked to each other again, and then Dustin said, "Okay, uh, on three?"

"One," Max said.

“Two,” said Will and Lucas in unison.

They paused for a second, before Mike finally said, “Three!” And they all threw themselves against the door. It creaked slightly, and they all tried again, starting to feel very uncomfortable with the heat that was building in the room, and the smoke that was once again flying into their faces. They kept knocking the door, feeling themselves relax a bit as the creaks got louder and louder.

Finally, as they tossed themselves one final time at the door, it broke, just slightly, knocking itself open. Will pushed it slightly forwards, so they could all see out before running.

Unfortunately, as they peered through outside, they all saw several of the adults in the parking lot, full of those long, black cars, and they were loading up, throwing what looked like boxes and files into the backseat, getting ready to flee. The forest was too far away for them to get to without moving into view.

“They’ll see us.” Mike said worriedly, backing up slightly, as everyone else tensed up. “They’ll see us if we run and they’ll catch us- you know we all suck at running...”

“I don’t, but I’m not leaving you.” Max said quickly.

“They’ll catch us and we’ll be right back where we started,” Dustin said shakily, “But worse. They were gonna separate us, remember? They want to split us...”

Slowly, Will looked between his friends, his heart sinking. They were right, they’d all get caught too easily. They didn’t know where they were, and these people probably knew their way around this land, they would be completely toast unless... unless they had a *distraction*.

No, don’t. He thought to himself. *To get out of this situation, you need to run. Mom said to run from a kidnapper. Jonathan said that, too. Run and don’t look back.*

But they didn’t expect this. They didn’t expect my friends to be collateral damage.

They’d agree with me if they knew.

“What are we gonna do?” Lucas asked, and Will knew exactly what they were going to do.

I’m sorry.

Will wouldn’t have to push past them to get out. He was right in front of the door. So, instead, he turned, staring at their faces, memorizing them, wondering when he’d see them all again.

And then he said, “You guys run.”

They didn’t understand. “What?” Lucas asked.

“What are you talking about?” Mike added.

“Will?” Max said.

Will shut his eyes, turning away, and he said again, “Run. As far as you can. Don’t look back.”

“Will? Will, no!” they were yelling now, but they didn’t think to try and hold him back until he’d already gotten outside.

He ran out of the building, quickly, so that they couldn’t stop him, because he knew they would if they could, they would *try* and then they’d all be in deep shit. He rushed out, noticing that the adults caught sight of him, hearing them call out for him- calling him “Kid” and “Byers.” How they knew his surname wasn’t important now, what was important was that they saw him.

Because he took off running, running away from the building, and all eyes were on him.

And by the time they caught up, by the time they grabbed him again, his friends had made it to the woods.

“Will!” they all called after him, but he didn’t listen.

Max was the first one to get them to move. “Let’s go!” she said, turning to them. “We have to get to the forest.”

“But Will-” Mike began.

“Will’s giving us a chance.” Max said, fighting back tears. “Let’s take it now and find him later.”

They looked to each other, knowing that all of their instincts were to go after Will, but Max was right; they had to get to safety first, and they’d go back for him as soon as they could.

They moved out, keeping their heads low as they eyed the adults out of the corners of their eye, trying to make sure they were hidden by the smoke and by Will’s distraction. They ran as fast as they could, hoping that they weren’t seen, trying as hard as they could not to look back, not to see what had happened to Will, not to think about how he’d just *run off*...

They made it to the forest, still not daring to look behind them to see if they were being pursued. They weren’t sure where they were going or which direction they should be headed, but they just knew that they had to get as far away as they possibly could.

As they passed a large tree, turning slightly to look around it, they froze. Two men were standing right in front of them, looking like they were moving away from the building, too. The kids stared at them, panic and terror still settling in. They thought for a brief second that maybe these were two random people, that maybe they weren’t with their kidnappers, that maybe they would help them, but just as they thought that, their eyes all flickered down to the men’s hands, seeing, very clearly, the boxes of matches.

The kids couldn’t think of what to do, fear gripping them. Max moved slightly in front of Lucas, while Dustin let out a quiet, “Shit.”

The adults hadn’t noticed them at first, but unfortunately, they turned, watching the kids with a bit of surprise, but another, darker look in their eyes.

One of the adults said, “You’re their new recruits, aren’t you?”

“Please,” Mike said, his voice breaking a little, “Please just leave us *alone*...”

But before the men could move, suddenly a figure jumped out of the bushes behind the kids, kicking the adults' feet out from under them.

The kids jumped back, with Dustin letting out another curse and Lucas grabbing onto Max's arm. They stared ahead as a blur of a person attacked the men, pulling one back by the arm while kicking the other in the face; when she paused to breathe, they realized that the attacker was a young girl. The first man tried to move, grabbing her from behind, but she just dropped to the ground and somehow tossed the man over her shoulder, watching as he hit the tree before whipping on the other one, grabbing a branch of the ground and using it to hit him across the head, effectively knocking him out.

The girl then stopped, breathing hard, as she dropped the branch and turned to the other kids, who were staring at her in complete confusion. Dustin, Lucas and Max glanced to each other, starting to feel a little afraid again, but Mike kept staring, looking at this girl as she looked back at them. She had dark, wildly curly brown hair, cut short, and she was dressed in all black. Her dark eyes were watching them blankly, her emotions completely shielded.

Then her eyes shut and she dropped to the ground.

Mike let out a gasp and then ran forwards, despite his friends' calls for him to stop. He knelt in front of her, saying, "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

She just looked up at him, almost confused at the words. "Are you *okay*?" Mike repeated. She slowly nodded, though she seemed very tired.

They heard a call from far away, sounding like an adult. Mike glanced to the others, who were still looking worriedly between the girl and the unconscious bodies, and Mike said, "Okay... we need to hide somewhere. We need to hide somewhere and figure out a plan." he turned to the girl. "Is there somewhere we can hide? Where the adults won't find us?"

She didn't respond, still looking bewildered.

"We'll find something." Mike said nervously, holding out his hand for

the girl. "Do you need help getting up?"

She hesitated, and Mike slowly put his arm around her, helping her stand; she didn't seem to be hurt, just very, very shocked.

"Who are you?" Max asked, moving forwards slightly. "What are you doing?"

The girl just shook her head, and then they heard another call.

"We have to keep moving." Mike said.

"What about Will?" Lucas asked.

They hesitated, looking to each other, before Mike said, "We'll find him. We'll find him, I *promise*, but we have to go, *now*."

So they spared one glance back towards the burning building, and then they ran again.

5. Bitter as Wormwood

CHAPTER FIVE

Bitter as Wormwood

Jonathan wasn't sure what was going on, but he wasn't about to argue with his Mom. If they were going to find Will, he knew they had to go fast; who knew how far the kidnappers had gotten?

He pulled a suitcase out of the back of the closet and dragged it to his room. He wasn't sure how long they'd be gone, but he packed enough clothes for about a week, and after some hesitation, he went to Will's room and packed some for him, too, in case they found him and couldn't return to town immediately. He still had some room left, so he put some of his books in there, as well as the record that him and Will liked to listen to. He smiled slightly, starting to hum *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* as he added an extra drawing pad for Will and zipped up the suitcase.

Once he'd finished, he went to the door, sitting outside for a while and waiting for his Mom to come home. But he didn't like that much; if he hadn't busy, his mind wandered to the current situation, and how *terrified* he was for his brother. Will was so sweet and sensitive, he couldn't *imagine* how this was affecting him. And he was outside for a *while*, with nothing to do but think and worry. After quite a bit, he went back inside, wondering if he should pack food- well, they didn't really have a lot of non-perishables, so maybe he'd just make them some food for the drive.

Then, as he was getting a pot out of the cabinet, he got a better idea. He'd help his Mom by packing her suitcase for her. He knew where her dresser was, he could get some clothes packed up so they could leave as soon as possible.

He grabbed another suitcase from the closet, dragging it into his Mom's room and opening the dresser, starting to throw shirts and pants in. As he reached the bottom of the drawer, though, he paused.

It felt like there was some kind of... some kind of *notch* on it?

Jonathan pushed some shirts away, looking down and seeing, yes, a small notch. He reached in, lifting up, and suddenly a false bottom lifted up. Jonathan gasped slightly, eyes wide; why would his Mom have a false bottom drawer?

As he peered inside, at first, he thought there was nothing there, and he started to wonder if maybe the false-bottom was just kind-of built in. And then he saw something in the back of the drawer, so cloaked in shadow that he almost missed it. He used one arm to hold the piece of wood up and grabbed the item with the other, pulling it out before letting the drawer drop. He pushed it closed before looking down at what was in his hands, studying it.

It was small, only about the size of his hand, and a dark color. There seemed to be several symbols in columns circling the item, that moved when he spun them. He flipped it to the bottom- or top, he didn't know which was which- and saw a strange symbol. Was that an eye? It took him a second to realize it was a lid, and when he flipped it open, he saw what looked like glass. This thing seemed to be about half of a telescope or something.

Now, why would his Mom have *this*?

And why would she hide it?

Joyce was *really* not looking forward to this.

She'd ducked around town, avoiding people as best she could- she knew they'd just offer sympathies, or try to find out what she knew about the incident, and she really didn't want to have to try to come up with some shit to say on the fly.

Instead, she went to each of the parents in turn, finally putting her fucking observational skills to use. And she was *not* liking what she was seeing.

She'd thought that she was safe. For over a decade, she had let her guard down, she'd let her *sons* run around and play in this stupid

town, she'd thought that nothing would happen to them. But she was missing everything right under her nose, just because she'd been delusional enough to think she'd gotten far enough away.

For the parents she'd already visited, only the Sinclairs scared her the least. They seemed to be in shock, and Joyce spent a lot of time making sure they knew that Lucas was strong, that she was sure they'd find him soon, that she was so sad for them. But even then, some books they happened to have lying around made her do a double-take. And while Claudia was just as terrified, well, Joyce noticed even more things she probably shouldn't have inside her house. Possible hidden doorways were just where she expected them to be, though she guessed that Claudia was probably oblivious to them; they were probably installed by Dustin's Father, who wasn't around anymore.

Susan Hargrove had a vague concern for her "darling Maxine" that her husband didn't seem to share; honestly, Neil reminded Joyce a bit too much of Lonnie, which made her very worried for Max. And Susan definitely didn't seem to know much about her daughter; Joyce had only met her a few times, while she was playing with Will, but even she knew that Max hated her full name and could throw a decent punch, and wasn't the "helpless Maxine" her mom seemed to think she was. And, to make her even more paranoid, Joyce noticed the signs on the walls, the books on the shelf, the glances away when she referenced a possibility that the children were abducted for certain reasons. And when she asked exactly what school Billy had been sent to, Neil had "politely" asked her to leave.

She had studied each parent in turn, watched their expressions, scanned their houses for a secret symbol or codeword written on the walls. And she hated the fact that she was only there for them to figure out what was going on. She hated studying them to try and see if their tears were legitimate, if they knew more than they let on. She knew it wasn't what she did, it was what... what someone else would do. But she did take some time to comfort them, to tell them that she was sure they'd find their children soon, that they were probably safe. She didn't dare say how she knew. She couldn't.

So now she'd moved over to the Wheeler house, once again dodging the rest of the town of Hawkins like the plague. When she knocked

on the door, Karen answered giving her a hug and inviting her in. "I have some tea," she said quietly. "If you want to... talk."

Joyce hesitated before nodding. "I... I guess. Where's Ted?"

"Went to work." Karen said, a slight edge to her voice. Joyce didn't blame her for that; she'd be pissed if her spouse just went to work like it was a normal day the night after their child was abducted.

Joyce had known Karen since she was in town as a teenager, but she hadn't talked to her much back then, just seen her running around with her friends and occasionally showed her how to swipe some alcohol. They'd re-introduced themselves when Joyce first moved in several years before, and Karen was the first neighbor to bother paying her a visit. And, well, they *had* to know each other pretty well, as their children were basically inseparable.

"Holly's at school." Karen said, as she grabbed the tea, "She doesn't really understand what's going on, I don't think."

Joyce said, as she sat down at the table, "I wouldn't expect her to." *After all*, she definitely didn't say, *Mike was only a bit younger than her when your first daughter...*

Oh. Oh, shit.

Karen handed her the tea, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. "I just want to say I'm sorry. I should've been there, and *your Will*."

"You didn't know." Joyce said carefully, staring down at her tea, trying not to say, *Yes, you should have been there, for your child as well as the others*. "You didn't know."

"Still, I feel horrid." Karen said, tracing a shape in the table with her finger. "I felt awful when I got home and saw police cars out front, and I just *knew*..."

She didn't finish that, and she didn't have to. Joyce sipped the tea, and then said, "Was Holly here?"

"Oh, no. No, she was at a friend's."

Of course. “And you and Ted were out?”

“Yes. Thought we could have a quiet night out. Mike is normally very responsible, we just didn’t think...”

“I understand.” Joyce said, putting the teacup down. “And I’m so, so sorry that you’re going through this, too.”

“I’m so sorry about your son.” Karen said quietly. “How’s Jonathan?”

“Still in shock.” Joyce guessed, wondering for the millionth time in the last few hours if she really should have left him alone. “He’s at home right now. I guess...”

“I just hope the police can find something.” Karen said blankly. “They’re already out of town, but they have contacts, right?”

Joyce knew full well that the police wouldn’t find shit, so instead, she decided to just bring the conversation to the point she *really* didn’t want to go to.

“Uh, Karen?”

“Yes?”

Joyce hesitated, before saying, “Uh, do you not have any sugar?”

Karen stared at her in bewilderment for a while, before she said, “Oh! Oh, the tea. Yes, sorry it’s so bitter...”

“Well,” Joyce said, taking in a breath and hoping that she was wrong, “I guess tea should be bitter as wormwood and as sharp as two-edged sword, shouldn’t it?” Karen’s silence was all she needed. So she stared down at the table, refusing to look up, before adding, “I didn’t realize this was a sad occasion.”

There was a beat, before Karen said, “The world is... Joyce, I didn’t realize...”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t know you were, either. It’s a lot bigger than we first thought, isn’t it?”

"I just... was positioned here. In case apprentices went by, like I did--"

"Is Ted-?"

"No. Oh, no, he's not... I decided to stay in town with him, and I wasn't much of a loss, I guess, because they let me be so long as I contacted them to tell them about any suspicious fires or thefts."

"Did you tell them anything else?" Joyce asked.

Karen didn't seem to understand. "No. Are you here to, what, keep an eye on me?"

"Oh, fuck no." Joyce said, causing Karen to jump. "I left."

Karen stared at her, completely bewildered. "You *what*?"

Joyce didn't elaborate, instead saying, "And did they ask you?"

"What?"

"Before taking Mike."

Karen looked horrified, tears coming to her eyes. "Joyce, I swear to God, I didn't think they wanted him. I swear, if I knew they wanted to recruit him I would *never* have let other kids sleep over, especially if..."

"So they didn't ask?" Joyce said, almost coldly. "Huh. Guess that means I was right all along. I mean, exactly how do you ask about kidnapping children?"

"Recruiting." Karen said, almost instinctively.

"I know what I said." Joyce said.

"Joyce, really, I promise, I had no idea..."

"They probably did." Joyce said. "If they've been watching your son, they'll have seen mine, and probably me, too. When they realized there was a sleepover, they probably also realized it was too good an opportunity to pass up, with other intelligent children *right there*."

"I didn't think they wanted Mike, they didn't ask about him for thirteen years."

"Karen, you've seen that boy write." Joyce said. "You've seen his imagination, his curiosity. He's basically their posterchild already, unless we get him back."

Karen stared at her blankly. "Get him back?"

"You don't have to stay with them." Joyce said quickly. "You don't have to, you can leave. We'll go somewhere, somewhere they haven't reached. Karen, we'll get our babies back."

Karen still looked a bit confused. "Joyce," she recited, "They're good and noble. You know that."

Joyce was still, after years of isolation from *them*, very sick of hearing that. So she stood up and stared Karen in the eyes as she harshly said, "When was the last time they let you see your daughter?"

And after another second, Joyce said, "I'm getting my son back, Karen. Whether you'll help me or not."

And then she left.

Joyce pushed open the door, calling worriedly, "Jonathan?"

"Here!" Jonathan called from his room, hastily rushing out of his room, looking slightly guilty, but Joyce didn't have time to ask him why. "I packed my stuff, packed some of your clothes, too, if you want anything else."

"That's great, Jonathan, thank you." she said. "We'll get them in the car, I know our first stop. I'll explain everything once we find a safe place, I promise, we just have to go as fast as possible. Who knows how far away they are now..."

At that moment, they heard a knock at the door.

Joyce glanced to Jonathan, before moving to the door, pausing before opening it, her hand in her pocket. Karen was there, and Joyce glanced back, saying, “Jonathan, please go get the stuff in the car.”

As Jonathan left, Karen said, “I... I can’t help you, Joyce. I can’t leave, I can’t spend my life running, I can’t do that to Ted and Holly... but...”

She then opened her bag, pulling out a large book, passing it to Joyce. “They changed Headquarter locations in the last few years. They have some new codes, too. It’s all in here. And I won’t tell them anything, won’t tell them about you.”

Joyce looked down at the book in her hands, then back up at her friend. “Karen, thank you...”

Close to tears, Karen also passed her another book- a small copy of some old Fantasy book. “This is... this is Mike’s favorite. He drew on the page corners. He’s going to want it. Please... please tell him I love him. Give him a hug for me.”

Joyce sadly smiled and nodded.

“And if you find my girl,” Karen’s voice broke, “Tell her I love her, too.”

6. This New Girl is Scaring Everyone

CHAPTER SIX

This New Girl is Scaring Everyone

They ran for what seemed like forever, not bothering to stop to talk. When they finally reached a small cabin, they all rushed in, shutting the door and just resting for a few moments, sliding to the empty floor and struggling not to cry.

Finally, Max said, "What are we gonna do?"

They looked at each other, none of them knowing the answer. After a minute, Dustin said, "How are we gonna get Will back?"

"We can't just leave him." Lucas added.

"We don't know where he is." Max said. "Where they *took* him."

After a second, Mike turned to the girl beside them and asked, "Do you know?"

The girl froze as everyone's attention turned directly to her.

"Who are you?" Max asked, as her and the others moved closer.

"Are you with them? Are you escaping with us?" Lucas asked.

"How'd you know how to knock those guys out?" Dustin asked.

"What do you know about them?" Max added.

"Are you deaf?" Dustin reached forwards, clapping besides her ear. She flinched. "Nope, not deaf."

"Guys, leave her *alone*!" Mike said, jumping to his feet and pushing the others backwards. "You're scaring her!"

"She's scaring *me*!" Lucas said. "She beat the shit outta two adult

arsonists, who knows what she could do to us?”

“I don’t think she’s gonna hurt us.” Mike said. “I think she’s safe. Just don’t rush her, I think she’s in shock.”

After they finally calmed down, though they were still shooting Mike death glares, he turned back to the girl, kneeling down to get eye-level with her, as she was still curled in the corner. She watched him, some kind of surprise in her face.

“Are you hurt?” he asked carefully.

After a second, she shook her head.

“Okay, okay. Uh, let’s start from the beginning. What’s your name?” When she stayed silent, he pointed to himself and said, “I’m Mike. That’s Max, Dustin and Lucas. We’re safe. We want to help you. Do you have a name?”

After a second, she nodded.

“Okay. Okay, what is it?” When she didn’t respond, Mike added, “Uh, if you... if you don’t trust us yet, that’s okay, I guess, but we need something to call you.”

“She looks like an Eleanor.” Dustin said, sitting next to Mike.

“Dude, you can’t just *give her* a name.” Lucas said, sitting on his other side, as Max sat next to him.

“Well, we need *something* to call her!” Dustin said.

“You can’t just-”

The girl quickly nodded, gesturing slightly to Dustin.

“Is... is your name *Eleanor*?” Mike asked.

The girl paused, thinking it over.

“It’s okay if it’s not.” Mike said.

Max then asked, “Is it close?”

The girl shrugged.

“Ella? Eliana? Ellie?” Max guessed, counting names on her fingers, “Elaine, Electra, Elizabeth, Ellen, Eloise, Elise...”

The girl hesitated, apparently thinking through the names, and then she opened her mouth, very quietly saying, “El.”

“Oh! You can talk!” Dustin said, shocked.

“El?” Mike said, picking up pretty quickly that this probably wasn’t her actual name, but, again, they’d only just met, it was okay if she didn’t trust them instantly. “Is that what we should call you? El?”

She nodded.

“Well, uh, El...” Mike said, “We’re looking for our friend Will. We were all kidnapped and trapped in that burning building, but he’s still with the people who took us. Do you know anything about them?”

When she nodded again, the others immediately started talking, once again asking questions at the same time, and it took Mike a bit to calm them down. Then he turned back to her and said, “Listen, you look kinda scared, and that’s okay! We’re all scared. You don’t have to tell us-”

“Yes she *does*.” Lucas said.

Mike glared at him. “She doesn’t have to tell us anything she doesn’t want to!”

El looked surprised at this, but the expression faded by the time Mike turned back to her. “Just... do you know what’s going on? We’re all clueless.”

She slowly nodded.

“But you can’t tell us?”

She shook her head.

“Damnit, Mike, we need to know this stuff!” Max said, but Mike just

glared at her before continuing.

“Is there something you can tell us?”

She paused to consider, and then leaned over, taking off her right shoe. The other kids were very confused, until she pulled back her sock and showed them a tattoo, stretched over her ankle.

“Holy shit.” Max said.

It looked like some kind of eye. But after only a few seconds, El covered it up again, putting her shoe back on, looking very upset and guilty.

“What does that mean?” Mike asked.

El just shook her head, curling up a bit more.

“What’s wrong with her?” Dustin asked.

“You can’t just *ask that!*” Max told him.

“Shut *up!*” Mike said. “If she doesn’t want to talk, she doesn’t have to. I think she got kidnapped, too, and she’s running like we are. Is that right?”

El considered, before slightly nodding.

“Okay, so... I, I think we should keep moving.” Mike said. “We can find a town, maybe get the police-”

El wildly shook her head.

“What?” Mike said. “We... we can’t go to the police? Are these people... connected to them?”

El wasn’t sure how to respond, she just kept shaking her head.

“Okay, okay...” Mike said. “No police...”

“If we can’t go to the police, we can’t go to anyone.” Max said. “They’ll just send us straight to the cops. No one would believe us if we told them we were kidnapped but couldn’t trust law

enforcement.”

Lucas turned towards El, a slight glare on his face, as he said, “Are you *sure* we can’t trust them?”

El nodded.

“Why?”

El flinched, glancing to the ground, and it took her a while before she could say, “They’re with them.”

“Them?”

“My...” she considered. “Family.”

“Your family?” Mike asked, confused.

She mimed striking a match.

“Oh! Oh, the arsonists.” Mike said. “They’re... they’re your family?”

She nodded glumly, moving to play with her sock.

“You’re running from your family?” Max asked, suddenly looking sad.

“Yes.”

“So the Arsonists are in the police?” Dustin asked, and when El nodded again, he said, “Well, fuck. What are we gonna do?”

“We’ll just find a map and find our way home.” Mike assured them. “Our parents’ll know what to do.”

“We have to find Will.” Dustin said.

“We’re *kids*, and we don’t know how many adults are holding Will hostage.” Mike said. “Our parents’ll be able to help. We should go now, though, so we can get there as fast as possible.”

“We don’t know how far away the town is. We could be walking all night, and we’ve been awake for a while.” Lucas said.

“So, you want to sleep here?” Mike asked.

“We’re not that far from the fire. What if they find us?” Max said.

“I think they were driving away in another direction. We’re pretty far from the roads.” Lucas replied.

“But what about those guys with the matches? The ones El beat the shit outta?” Dustin said. “They were walking.”

Mike turned back to El. “Those guys you attacked. Did they have anyone with them?”

El paused, before nodding.

“Would they find us here?”

She considered for quite a long time, before shrugging.

“You don’t know?”

“We’re in so much shit.” Dustin said. “Can they track you?”

El’s eyes widened; she clearly hadn’t considered that.

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” Mike said quickly. “Okay, we’ll sleep here tonight, see if we can plan out how to get home, and then we’ll find Will. We’re not just gonna leave him, right?”

They all nodded, and Mike said, “Okay, uh... let’s find a good place in here to sleep, then.”

“Can I come in?”

Nancy glanced up from her room, dropping the match she was fiddling with back into the box. “Yeah? Something up?”

She’d been sitting by the windowsill, keeping watch while their regular guard took a well-deserved nap, but she’d gotten a bit distracted by the idea of playing with fire. As Steve walked in, sitting across from her, he said, “It’s, uh, about our allies.”

“What about them?” Nancy asked, though she didn’t sound as angry as normal.

“I think they really want to leave.” Steve said. “Like, run out, maybe spill secrets. I don’t think... I don’t think our superiors would like that we’re running around with them instead of staying at our post.”

“Steve, we talked about this.” Nancy sighed, once again pulling out a match to flip between her fingers. “It doesn’t matter what they want; they can help us, we can help them. We burn down our enemies’ buildings, and look the other way when they target our allies. We get them information on hidden locations, and they let us tag along. And if our mentors are gonna be running around stealing fortunes instead of training us, we’ve gotta do something. They’ll understand.”

“I know, I know...” Steve muttered. “It’s just... what if they do spill about the organization? We can’t have people knowing everything about us.”

“I don’t think they will.” Nancy said. “They want revenge, and once everyone who hurt them is gone, they’ll leave the rest of us in peace.”

Steve still looked unconvinced, so Nancy added, “Besides, you know what they have. You know what they’re hiding from us. If we can stick around long enough to get it from them... we could win.”

They were silent for another second, and then Steve said, “Hand me a match.”

Nancy grinned, holding out the box for him. Steve lit the match, holding the small flame between them. As they stared at it, entranced by the flickering heat, the door opened again. They whipped around, Nancy’s ponytail falling over her shoulder, to see their ally, staring at the match between them.

“Could you please do that outside?” Kali asked, walking forwards. “You drop that and we’re all dead.”

“Shit.” Steve muttered, putting the match out and rolling his eyes. “Sorry.”

Nancy, completely unapologetic, asked, “What is it?”

"We've got new info." Kali said, sitting between them and holding out a telegram. "One of our contacts intercepted this and sent it our way, and I decoded it while you two were playing with matches. Apparently the *Firefighters*-" she said this term with as much contempt as she could- "recruited a shitton of kids at once. Someone from *your* side burned their hideout in an attempt to kidnap the kids, but they managed to get away, and all but one are lost in the woods."

"And why do we give a shit?" Steve asked.

"Shut up and let me finish." Kali said. "They managed to escape with a Firestarter neophyte. They don't specify which one, but apparently it was their first mission, and they're pretty desperate to find them again, seeing as they're calling in backup."

"I don't see what the issue is." Nancy said carefully, not really wanting to piss off Kali. "Those kids'll get caught soon, especially if they play noble and try to go to the cops. Worst case scenario, the little firestarter gets stuck in a volunteer headquarters and manages to light it up."

"Well," Kali said, "It looks like our arsonists had a photographer with them when the kids escaped-"

"Oh, photographers are the worst." Steve interrupted.

"And, unfortunately, we have a problem." Kali said, dropping the telegram to the floor and showing them a second piece of paper she was holding, which was a second telegram. "While they obviously don't attach the photo, they describe the children, and our 'little firestarter' happens to be someone I know very well."

"Old friend?" Nancy asked.

Kali paused. "Something like that. The point is, her mentors are not very kind to her. I'd like to get her out ourselves."

"How far away is it?" Nancy asked.

"About a night's ride if we leave now. Of course, we'll have to search the woods, but if we stop at the town just outside, we can split- some of us searching the woods, some of us waiting for them to arrive."

Funshine had some baticeer training in his childhood, he might be able to send the woods search party messages.”

“So,” Steve said, “You want us to help you kidnap one of *our own* recruits?”

“One who’s being hurt, yes.” Kali said.

Nancy paused, glancing over the second telegram, not understanding all the jumbled codewords. “Who are the other kids?”

“We think a couple of legacies, but we’re not sure. They just said that four of them- maybe twelve or thirteen years old- are traveling with her, and they were probably grabbed from somewhere pretty far away.”

Nancy hesitated before asking, “When do we move out?”

“Five minutes. Get your shit together.”

Kali left, then, probably to find the rest of her team.

Slowly, Steve said, “I thought we wanted to go to the headquarters in Beaumont.”

“Might as well get our allies on our good side; I think Kali was a bit put out by our last mission.” she said, as she stood up, pocketing her matches. “Worst comes to worst, we have to deal with a few kids for a couple more months. What else could happen?”

7. A fun Byers Family Roadtrip

CHAPTER SEVEN

A fun Byers Family Roadtrip

As Joyce got into the car, Jonathan said, “Mom, what... what’s going on?”

Joyce glanced over to her son, guilt written across her face. She hated lying to him, she’d *always* hated lying to her sons, but she didn’t have a fucking choice...

“What... what do you remember, of the time before we moved to Hawkins?”

Jonathan considered, as Joyce began to drive. “Not much. I was, what, five? I... I remember when Will came home for the first time, cause he kept crying a lot and I couldn’t sleep. I remember... well, I remember Dad.” Joyce flinched, and he said, “Don’t remember many happy things.”

“Do you... remember the day we left?”

Jonathan shut his eyes. “I... I think so. I remember... I remember that night, you woke me up and told me to be very quiet, and to pack as much as I could in one suitcase. I did, and we climbed out my window- I remember that, because I thought it was fun.”

“We couldn’t use the door. Too loud.” Joyce said.

“And then we got in a car I hadn’t seen before, and we drove all night, with Will in the backseat. Then we ditched the car somewhere, and we walked into a town, got on a bus, and... then I just remember going into the house and setting up Will’s room.”

“We kept switching buses.” Joyce nodded. “For a couple of days. Just getting as far away as we could, sleeping on long drives, eating what I’d managed to pack and what we could find at bus stations. We got

to town, and the house I lived in as a teenager was still empty, so we just moved in.”

“Uh, was that... was that the last time you saw Dad?”

Joyce nodded. “I stole that car. You know? From... some old friends. Stole it, drove it to our house, and hid it until Lonnie was asleep. I really didn’t want to run, I knew if we got caught, you two would go straight back to him, and I wouldn’t be there for you, but it was a risk we had to take.” She sighed. “I got twelve years of peace. Well, not peace. I just kept looking and looking for signs that it would happen again, that I completely missed all the things I *should’ve* been looking for.”

She sighed, and then turned to Jonathan. “And I’m *sorry*, I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you before now, that I still *can’t* tell you everything. I just wanted this all to be over, just wanted to forget about it and have a normal life... and now it’s too late.”

Jonathan watched her as she turned a bend, and he knew they were heading out of town. “So,” Jonathan said quietly, “We *are* going to find Will? And the other kids?”

Joyce nodded. “I can’t promise it’ll be soon- God knows where they sent them. But we’ll find them, and then we’ll *run*.”

Hopper was somehow even more confused when he drove over to the Byers House and found it completely empty.

He knocked on the door for a while, until he realized that it was unlocked. And when he walked inside, Joyce and Jonathan were nowhere to be found. Joyce left a note on the table, saying something about finding Will, but leaving no indication as to where she might have gone first, which wasn’t great- for her as well as Hopper.

Hopper knew that once people realized the Byers had left town, the rumors would start, and he knew they wouldn’t be good; people would speculate about her being involved in this mess, and no matter how much information Hopper was convinced she was hiding, he

knew that she didn't deserve that.

He was about to turn and leave when he heard something coming from another room. It took him a second to realize it was some kind of thud- something or someone had fallen. He paused for a second, before rushing into the next room, throwing the door open and staring as some girl he didn't know looked up at him, surprised, her hand buried in the drawer of a table.

They stared for a second, before she leapt to her feet, moving towards the open window. Hopper started forwards, but she was gone before he could even reach her, running straight into the woods.

Well, that wasn't normal.

Hopper moved towards the drawer she'd been digging through, but it was empty, except for two small books. He was about to leave, to try and follow the girl into the woods, when he spotted a paper, lying underneath the window.

When he picked it up, he noticed first that the writing on it wasn't Joyce's. The girl must have dropped it, maybe on purpose- the words looked very... oddly threatening. It was just one sentence, written multiple times, and then several ciphers, but each cipher seemed about the same length as the first sentences, so it was probably just the same thing, over and over, across the page.

The World is Quiet Here.

Alright, fuck it.

He had to find Joyce.

The first hotel they stopped at, they stayed in for the night. And while Joyce was asleep- which neither Byers thought would happen, but she eventually fell into a light sleep, bent over some book on the table she said was important- Jonathan pulled the broken telescope out of his suitcase. There seemed to be markings on the sides, maybe some kind of code or combination lock? But no matter what he tried, nothing happened.

When morning came around, he re-packed the spyglass, tried to get some light reading done, but that was a bit hard when he had no idea what was going on and was still worried about his brother, and what exactly his Mom knew.

He eventually moved to the window, staring at the streets outside. They hadn't ever been outside of Hawkins since they'd moved, he couldn't actually believe that there were so many people outside, so many people living so close together, which so much *noise*. The noise wasn't very nice, to be honest; he much preferred the silence of their house.

Jonathan glanced towards the books beside his Mom, which were all spread open on the table. He peered at the pages, and after a second, he slowly grabbed one of them, sliding it off the table and hoping he didn't wake her up.

On the page was written instructions for some kind of code, and as he read, Jonathan got more and more confused. Starting at the ringing of a bell? Every eleventh word? Who had the time for that? Who had the *focus* for that? He could barely focus on a normal conversation, let alone one he had to pay attention to the word order of. What about hyphenated words?

The pure incomprehensibility of this code gave Jonathan quite the delayed reaction, but eventually he did reach the question he needed to be asking: *why does my Mom have a book out on secret codes?*

At that point, he glanced out the window again, and froze, staring ahead.

That was new.

He moved over to his Mom, quickly replacing the book before shaking her awake. "Mom. Mom?"

Joyce slowly opened her eyes, yawning, "What? What's going on?"

"Mom, there's a Hawkins police car outside."

Joyce instantly sat up. She looked out the window to check for herself, and then cursed under her breath. "Jonathan, please put

these books away. I'll be in the Lobby."

"What? What are you gonna...?"

"Jonathan, I swear, I'll be right back. Just get everything packed, I'll be right up."

Jonathan paused, and then nodded.

"I swear, I'll tell you everything once we're safe," she promised again. "We should be at our first location in a few days. I'll be back soon."

She rushed out the door, then, and Jonathan slowly picked up the books, skimming the open pages. It was mostly stuff on codes and ciphers, like the one he'd found. How was that supposed to help them?

Then he found a paper on the table. His Mom had hastily been scribbling onto it, it looked like. Probably right before she fell asleep. None of the words made sense together, in fact a lot of it looked like gibberish.

Well, that's what it *looked* like.

Jonathan glanced towards the door, and then put the books back on the table, leaving the pages open. He got another pencil, and another sheet of paper, and then muttered to himself, "Okay. Which code did you use?"

Down in the Lobby, Joyce saw Hopper having what looked like an angry conversation with the man at the desk, who just looked very, very tired. She didn't blame him; he probably didn't know the severity of the situation and thought this was just another annoying customer.

"Hop!" Joyce called, crossing her arms as he turned around. He said something hastily to the man, and then walked over.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Hopper asked.

“How did you find me?” Joyce asked back.

“You probably shouldn’t use your real name when signing into hotels.” Hopper said. “I just called the nearby ones and asked.”

“I didn’t think anyone would *follow me*,” Joyce groaned. “And we’re in an unoccupied city, it should’ve been safe.”

“Unoccupied? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Go back, Hopper. I’m finding Will.” Joyce said.

“Joyce...” Hopper lowered his voice, glancing around at everyone in the lobby; nobody seemed to be listening. “You’re clearly hiding something. We need to know everything we can in order to find these kids.”

“I’m doing what I can, you do what you can.” Joyce said.

Hopper paused, for a second, and then pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to her. “This was dropped off at your house.” he said.

Joyce glanced down at it, freezing when she saw it.

The World is Quiet Here. The World is Quiet Here. The World is Quiet Here.

Goddamnit.

“So,” Hopper said, “Can we talk?”

8. The Best Family Reunions are the ones that involve Arson

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Best Family Reunions are the ones that involve Arson

The cabin was very, very small, and there were only three rooms, one of which seemed to be some kind of bathroom. The first room they'd been in was completely empty, the bathroom was just off to the side, and then there was a ladder that led up to the second floor, which had one bedframe and absolutely nothing else.

"Nobody's lived here for a very long time." Mike deduced.

"The bed looks about as comfortable as the floor." Max huffed.

"Okay, okay..." Mike said carefully. "Uh, we'll all sleep up here, and have one person guarding, and switch out every now and again. I can go first..."

And he did, sitting on top of the ladder and watching the second floor, waiting for someone to arrive. El tried to join him at one point, but he gently told her that it was okay for her to try and sleep. And after a while, he woke Dustin up and swapped with him, falling asleep pretty damn fast. Even though the floor was far from comfortable, it had been quite the exhausting day.

When it was Max's turn to watch, she noticed that Lucas was still awake. He was inbetween Dustin and Mike, while they'd let El take the bed. She moved over, poking him and saying, "Hey, wanna talk while we look at nothing?"

He slowly sat up and nodded, and they moved over to the hole that led to the second floor, peering down. After a second, Max said, "Are you... are you okay?"

“What?” Lucas asked, glancing up.

“It’s just... you seem so... you and Mike seem so in control.” she said, not looking at him as she talked. “Like you know exactly what to do. But... God, it’s nothing.”

Lucas paused, before saying, “We’re... we’re not. I mean, obviously I can’t read Mike’s mind, but I’m sure he’s just as scared as we are. We’re just taking control because someone has to, we can’t all be panicking at once. I didn’t... I didn’t even realize it was working.”

“Well, a bit.” Max shrugged.

“Are you... are you really scared?”

“Of course I am.” Max muttered, moving her eyes to the ceiling. “I snuck out of my house to have a fun night with my only friends, and then someone grabbed me off the floor, shoved me into a car, dropped me off in the middle of nowhere, and then tried to set me on fire. I have... I have *no* idea what’s happening and...” Shit. She didn’t want to cry now. She really didn’t. “Who knows what they’re doing to Will?” Max continued, hoping the tears didn’t burst out. “He... he just fucking *ran*, so that we could get out...”

“He’s gonna be okay.” Lucas assured her. “Will’s a lot stronger than he looks, he’s probably already escaped.”

“But *God* only knows where.” Max retorted. “He could be miles away by now, and whatever they wanted us for... you don’t think they killed him, do you?”

“No! No, if they wanted us dead they would’ve killed us earlier.”

“But why...” she just sighed. “It doesn’t make sense. Why kidnap a bunch of kids? It can’t be for ransom, my family wouldn’t care enough, and I don’t think Dustin or Will’re swimming in cash.”

“If El... if El’s *actually* another escapee, then we’re not the only targets.” Lucas replied. “Maybe it’s like that one book we read in the third grade, where kids got kidnapped in order to enter into a tunnel and look for the diamond, because the adults were too big.”

“What do you mean, ‘if El’s actually another escapee?’” Max asked.
“Do you think she’s *lying*?”

“I don’t know. I don’t see why she would, but we’ve only known her a few hours, and she knocked those guys out cold, she’s clearly dangerous if she wants to be. Maybe she’s...”

“What?”

“You don’t think she’s with them, and just trying to lure us back?”

Max considered, before saying, “No. No, she just seems very scared. Very sheltered, too, I don’t think she actually knows a lot. Maybe they’ve had her for a while, long enough to make sure she doesn’t know how to talk to people. And she said the arsonists were her family, I don’t see why anyone would want to stay with them.”

Lucas nodded, but she could tell the fear was still on his mind.

“Well, we’ll just make sure we don’t let her drag us into dark secluded alleys or black cars, I guess.” Max said, smiling a little.

“Yeah.” Lucas nodded. “And... don’t worry, Max. We’re gonna be okay. I know it.”

Mike was shaken awake sometime in towards early morning, and instead of just switching out with the others, Lucas just gathered them all together, saying, “We should just go now.”

“Do you know how far away town is?” Mike asked El, who he had a feeling nobody had asked to guard that night. El shook her head. “Have you been here before?” Another *no* .

“We shouldn’t just *sit here*.” Lucas reminded them. “Who knows how close those assholes are?”

“Lucas’s right.” Max said quickly. “Let’s go, before they get here.”

“Okay, okay.” Mike said. “What supplies do we have again?”

“A hairpin, your notebook and pencils, a bit of gum, minimal money, and a receipt for Lucas’s schoolbooks.” Dustin recapped. “And, uh, that’s about it.”

Mike glanced towards El. “Have you got anything? In your pockets?”

El glanced down at her outfit, which seemed to just be a long-sleeved black shirt and black jeans. She reached into one pants pocket and pulled out a box of matches.

“Why do you have that?” Max asked worriedly.

El shrugged, re-pocketing it. She reached into the other pocket, pulling out another item, one that seemed much more interesting. It was a dark gold item, and as they all leaned in to look, they realized it seemed to be some kind of telescope.

“Is that a spyglass?” Lucas asked, wide-eyed.

El nodded, expanding it and showing it off some more.

“That’s fucking cool!” Dustin said.

“Why do you have a spyglass?” Mike asked.

El bit her lip and glanced to the ground, before whispering, “For watching.”

“Watching?” Mike asked.

“The fire.”

Oh, oh yeah. She was with the arsonists.

“Do you... do you know why they burned down the building?” Mike asked carefully. “Was it... was it to hurt us?”

El thought for a very long time, before saying, “To hurt... the others.”

“Others?” Dustin asked.

“The guys who kidnapped us?” Lucas asked.

El nodded towards Lucas.

“Well, to be fair, I’m fine with that.” Lucas muttered. “They’re fucking assholes.”

“And they *still have Will*.” Mike reminded him. “Alright, let’s go into town. But don’t be too noticeable- we don’t know if our kidnappers are still hanging around.”

They left the cabin, then, with El hanging out somewhere in the middle of the group, not wanting to be seen by others. They walked for what was probably quite a few hours, until they finally spotted a few buildings in the distance and almost cried with relief.

“What’s the plan?” Dustin asked, as they neared the edge of the woods.

“I... I think we should first find a telegram?” Max suggested. “Tell our parents where we are.”

“That sounds good.” Mike said. “Maybe we can buy some food. We can’t very well live off of gum.”

“We should save that money for a bus home.” Dustin said, and they all quietly nodded- except for El, who was simply staring blankly ahead.

They walked out of the woods and past three houses on the edge, wandering through the street, scanning each building to see if they could find something useful. None of the adults passing them on the roads looked at them oddly, which gave Mike the impression that they were used to strangers, which could be both good and bad for them.

What was odd was El’s reaction to basically everything. She was completely wide-eyed, staring between the buildings and the people, looking fascinated by a dog that rushed by at the side of its owner, jumping in surprise when a car passed them, honking at the kids who were a bit too close to it.

Finally, Dustin pointed out a post office, and as they moved to the door, Lucas reminded everyone, “Okay, now I know we’re supposed to go to an adult when we’ve been kidnapped, but if- are you *sure* we can’t trust the police? Okay, okay, they’ll just take us to them, so just... come up with a story.”

They all filtered in, with El moving a bit closer to Mike, now looking intently at the stacks of envelopes and cards. Dustin rushed up towards the man at the counter, who was boredly reading *Anna Karenina*, and said, “How much for a telegram?”

The man glanced up, saying, “Where to?”

“Uh, Hawkins.” Dustin said carefully, glancing behind him as Lucas and Max started wandering over towards the gift bags, and Mike followed El to make sure she didn’t grab anything she shouldn’t.

“That’s quite a while away.” the man said. “How much you got?”

Normally, the kids knew, when someone asks for how much money you have before telling you the actual price, they intend to take all your money no matter how much the thing you requested would actually cost. Whether this was the case with the man at the counter, he certainly didn’t look impressed when Dustin simply placed out all they had.

“Are you kids runaways or something?” the man asked.

Dustin looked to El, and it took her a second to pick up on his look. She shook her head slightly, as Dustin said, “Got separated from our school group. Our, uh, Ellie over there ran off after a bird and we followed, and now we’re super lost. Where are we?”

The man answered, “Sherwood.”

With no idea where that was, Dustin just asked, “Can we get a telegram or not?”

“Ah, well, I’m afraid that’s not enough.” the man said.

“Sir, please, it’s an emergency, our parents’ll freak...”

El looked towards Dustin curiously, and then back to Mike. "What's happening?" she asked carefully.

"Uh, we need to give him money to use the telegram machine, but we don't have much." Mike explained.

"Money?"

"You know, the-"

El nodded, and then walked straight towards the counter. She stopped next to Dustin, and reached into her pocket, the same one she had the spyglass in. Then, to everyone's amazement, she pulled out a handful of cash and slammed it on the counter. As the man glanced from her to the money, El simply stared at him, completely blank.

Finally, the man said, "Hawkins it is. Telegram Machine's three aisles down, next to the porcelain kittens."

"Uh, thank you, sir." Dustin said, and then he gestured for them all to follow him down the aisles. As soon as they were out of earshot, he asked, "Where did you get that money, El?"

"And why didn't you tell us before?" Max asked.

El shrugged. "Not important."

"Uh, it's kinda important." Lucas said.

When they finally reached the machine, Dustin said, "Okay, my Dad showed me how to make one of these, so I can connect the circuits. We all know morse code, right?" They all nodded, including El. "Who can type the fastest?"

"That'd be me." Lucas said.

"I'll put on the earphones, so we can hear the signal being transmitted." Max said.

"And I'll dictate what to write." Mike volunteered, before glancing to El. "Would you mind keeping a lookout? Just stand at the end of the

aisle- don't move without us- and say something if you see someone coming towards us."

El nodded, moving away without another word.

Dustin started turning dials and flipping switches, Max put on the earphones, which were a bit too small for her, and Lucas glanced to Mike as he waited to tap.

"Just remember, 'STOP' is the code for the end of a sentence." Mike said.

"I've sent telegrams before, Mike." Lucas said. "Let's get this over with so we can get Will some help."

"Okay, now we don't want it to be too spelled-out." Mike said. "In case it's intercepted."

"Can telegrams be intercepted?" Max asked.

"I don't know, but we can't risk it." Mike said.

"We'll have to; we'll be putting our names on it, so anyone who intercepts it will know who we are instantly." Lucas said.

"Shit, you're right." Mike muttered. "And we should send it to the police station- who's the chief again?"

"Jim Hopper." Dustin said. "He's kinda scary."

"Are you sure?" Lucas asked worriedly. "If she's right and the police are compromised-"

"She might just mean in the city." Mike said, not wanting to consider the alternative. "I can't see our police being... let's start." Mike said.

Lucas started tapping, as Mike dictated, "To: Jim Hopper at Hawkins Police Station. From: Mike Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Dustin Henderson and Max Mayfield. We are currently safe but not for long STOP. We are somewhere called Sherwood STOP. We were separated from Will who is still with our kidnappers STOP. We managed to escape but we're still lost STOP. We will try to take a bus home but we don't

know who we can trust STOP. Please send help for Will, and once we return we will do our best to help find him with you STOP. We won't just abandon him STOP. Do not reply as we will be long out of town STOP. Please hurry STOP."

After a moment, Lucas said, "You don't want to say anything about... her?"

"I don't know if we have enough room." Mike muttered. "Plus, they might think she's with our abductors and, like, arrest her on sight. She's just as scared as we are."

"And," Max added, taking off the earphones as Dustin sent the telegram, "If we get 'intercepted', we don't know if *they* know she's with us."

Before anyone could say anything else, Mike glanced in El's direction, only to freeze once he realized she was gone. "El?"

"Fuck, fuck, fuck..." Dustin said, realizing the same thing.

"Shit, we shouldn't have trusted her!" Lucas said, as they all abandoned the device, rushing towards the front. "She's probably getting them right now, and she told us not to go to the police so they couldn't help-"

"Don't be paranoid, she probably just got lost." Mike said, though his own heart was sinking.

And as they turned an aisle, they saw El walking towards the front. "El!" Mike whisper-called, and she turned. He reached to grab her hand, but she flinched back, looking a bit fearful. "El, why did you leave?"

El gestured towards the front, and suddenly, they all heard a voice drifting from the counter.

"It's a simple question," said the voice of a girl, maybe in her late teens, "That requires a simple answer. Who's been in town?"

The kids glanced to each other, before all following El back to the front, peering from behind a wall of envelopes to see the man at the

counter; however, they couldn't get a good look at the girl.

"Listen, girlie," the man said, almost darkly, "I'm the only one stationed here, and nobody's checked in. So if you're not going to buy anything-"

"We know for a *fact* that Volunteers have been through here," she hissed. "So you can either tell us, or we can get the information out of you."

El stiffened, backing up. "Do you know her?" Mike asked, but El just shook her head and continued moving away.

"Come on, answer her." came a new voice- a teenage boy's.

"I wish someone came by, I've been in this dismal town for four years. If someone was nearby, they left without saying hello," the man said. "And even if there were, I wouldn't tell *you*. You're clearly not a Volunteer."

"Oh, you think *so*?" the girl asked, and suddenly they heard a very bad sound.

It was the sound of a match being struck.

"Go, go, go!" Mike said, pushing everyone around. He heard a gasp from the girl- *shit*, she heard him- as they all ran off, hoping there was a back way out, because whoever these people were, they were arsonists, and if arsonists were looking for "someone nearby"...

They rushed down aisles, hearing someone chasing after them. "Shit, shit!" Lucas muttered. "Where's the exit?"

El paused, standing in one aisle, before turning in another direction, gesturing to a sign that pointed to the exit.

"Thank God." Dustin said.

However, just as they turned an aisle, they came face-to-face with the girl.

It was clearly her; she looked out of breath from chasing them, and

they could easily see the box of matches sticking out of her pocket. She had her brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, and her blue eyes widened at the sight of the kids. Mike froze for a second, something unknown clicking in his head, but as everyone else started to back up, the girl said quickly, “Holy *shit*, you’re the missing kids!”

Shit. She knew who they were, she was definitely after them.

“Go, go!” Lucas said, turning to run.

As they followed, the girl rushed forwards, managing to grab El by the wrist. El let out a shriek, which the girl didn’t seem too bothered by, as she just said, “Wait, no! Stop, I know your-”

“Get away from her!” Mike yelled, instantly running over and grabbing the girl’s arm, trying to rip her away from El. Normally, he was not strong at all, but the girl was surprised, so she released her grip.

“Mike, come *on*!” Max yelled, as they slowed to a stop for him.

“Mike?” the girl asked, eyes widening in a sudden realization, as Mike pushed El forwards slightly to get her to run. “Mike *Wheeler*?”

Mike paused for a second at the sound of his name, stuttering a bit in surprise, but by then Dustin had run back, grabbing his arm and dragging him off with the rest of them, leaving the girl behind in the dust.

9. Hopper and Jonathan unlocked Joyce's Tragic Backstory

CHAPTER NINE

Hopper and Jonathan unlocked Joyce's Tragic Backstory

Joyce sat down at a table in the back of the room, pulling a cigarette out of her pocket. She'd slammed the paper down on the table, and was muttering, "Shit. Shit." under her breath.

"Joyce?" Hopper asked, sitting down.

"They know. They fucking know." Joyce muttered, lighting the cigarette and quickly dousing the match she'd used.

"Joyce—" Hopper reached over, taking the cigarette.

"Hey!" she called.

"Joyce, for fuck's sake, you have to tell me *something*."

Joyce sighed, and Hopper sat down and gestured to the paper. After a second of silence, he said, "'The World is Quiet Here.' What's that mean?"

Joyce looked away.

"Joyce. Listen. I don't know what you're scared of, what you think is gonna happen, but I swear to God, we can handle it. Joyce, *five kids* are in danger. Whatever's happening to them, I have to know. So we can get them back."

Joyce paused for the longest time, before she said, "I can't say much. They don't like having their secrets exposed, and most of the world wouldn't believe me, anyway. And there are things that you just... you just *can't* know, or understand. But..." She paused, shutting her eyes. "Let me... let me get Jonathan. And then we'll come down. He should hear this, too."

When Jonathan heard someone walking down the hall, he hastily shoved the books into his Mom's suitcase and shut it. He'd stopped trying to translate the code, instead focusing on taking notes on the codes already written out so he could translate later. He managed to shove the paper into his pocket before his Mother opened the door.

"Mom? What's going on?" he asked.

Joyce stared at him for a second, and then she said, "I... well, you're going to find out. Come downstairs with me for a bit. We need to talk."

"I was just about to go get you." Hopper said, as Joyce and Jonathan sat down, the latter looking quite surprised. "Thought you might've run."

"Not now." she sighed.

"Sorry, what's he doing here?" Jonathan asked.

Joyce glanced between them, looked around the room to make sure nobody was looking, and slowly said, "Uh, for starters... Hopper, do you... do you remember when I was in town as a teenager?"

Hopper nodded.

Joyce shut her eyes, took a deep breath, and said, as if she was lifting something heavy off of her chest, "Those weren't my parents. The people with me."

Neither Hopper nor Jonathan seemed to understand, so she added, "When... when I was seven years old, I was dragged out my bedroom window, and I never saw my parents again."

Jonathan's eyes widened, suddenly getting it. Hopper understood only slightly afterwards, too.

"So, you think those same people-" he said, but Joyce decided to

interrupt and keep going. Now that she could finally, *finally* reveal all of this, she wasn't going to stop anytime soon.

"After my abduction, I was dragged across the globe, running errands for random people my kidnappers stuck me with, until we found out the police stopped looking for me, which, you know, did wonders for my anxiety. The second the case got closed, I was transferred to Headquarters to study."

"Study?" Jonathan asked. "Study... what?"

Joyce sighed. "Study everything. Any bit of knowledge we could learn, they shoved on us. Sure, we had specialized interests, but we just spent all our time studying."

"Specialized interests?" Jonathan asked.

Joyce nodded. "One time in class the teacher caught me passing a note to a girl I liked written in a cipher I made up, and before I knew it I was in a million ciphering classes and memorizing every way to decode things."

"Decode?" Hopper asked.

Joyce gave him a look, before grabbing the sheet of paper, flipping it to the blank side and writing at an incredibly fast speed. Once she was done, she showed them what she'd written.

"Yvdmfpamw jkb'f fr Yvdmfpamw jehtshp ozc cnseiapg," svhipxiq Fc, xcvju ar gds dyt. "Eh'e wb zfqeqbix xb xs bsbn!" gukuar Yit, hcaovju psjj of lrn cxh qnsew. "V zcz'x gdwzo vp'g revn tav fkaq kvnze xb dohi chszxl kt bvrphk xuebsw, njr axuaf smehg zsgdwzk np oxp," nzrqh yehfpr Wak, avpv mr vjxgvrz gzmsb. "Kq'zr ccf Jnpvqv njr Ysgdsd, eaz smgu khtie," oouh Oaht gbjhqrgarxc sncy lrn qavaaf.

"Any idea how to translate?" Joyce asked.

"Is it gibberish?" Jonathan asked.

"It's the opening to *Little Women*." Joyce responded. "Codeword 'women', vigenere. Learned it when I was twelve, best in the class, used it specifically to piss off a boy who kept cheating off my

homework in Medieval Architecture.”

“Oh.” Jonathan said quietly.

“So you were in classes with... other kidnapped kids?” Hopper asked, sounding a little lost in the conversation.

Joyce nodded. “They called us ‘recruits.’”

“And your kidnappers were training you all to be, what? Scholars?”

Joyce shook her head. “Volunteers.”

“Sorry?”

“Basically spies; keeping disruptive secrets safe, keeping fires extinguished, keeping the world... quiet.” She sighed. “But it wasn’t as noble as it sounds. There was a... a schism, a long time ago, and some started fires instead of putting them out. But they were just the ones who were *obviously* destructive to others. The Other Side thought they were perfect, thought they could do no wrong. Because, well, the *others* are burning down buildings, nothing we do could be as bad as that. So they kept kidnapping kids, kept keeping secrets, kept acting like they were better. But I figured out what happened to people who disagreed with them, who wanted to do something different, who wanted change, who wanted *out* . And... and, well, I figured out what happened to the recruits’ parents.”

Jonathan jumped, while Hopper just kept watching her. “The parents?” he asked.

“They told me the firestarters got rid of mine.” Joyce sighed. “But, well, it seemed too convenient that it was the night I was kidnapped, wasn’t it?”

They were silent for a second, and Joyce said, “I doubt it’ll happen to the parents in Hawkins. They’re still useful, and any one of them who knows where their kids are isn’t going to fight. I was probably the most likely target for arson but, you know, I’m out of town now. Still might have to keep an eye out for fires, just in case.”

They were silent for a moment, as Joyce continued, “I was there for

so long. I bought into all of it, cause what fucking choice did I have? I was a kid. We were all kids.” she turned to Hopper. “When I was in Hawkins, it was my apprenticeship. Learned coding from the best two agents while pretending I was a normal teenage kid. What choice did I have? Nobody would’ve believed me if I tried to leave, and I was trying to impress my mentors. Trying to stay. Thought we were... we were *noble*.”

“And after I left Hawkins, I... well, I ended up hanging out with the... some bad Volunteers.” she sighed. “Married Lonnie- he was a Volunteer, too, but not a nice one. But with him, I... I started to see how fucked up things were getting. Noticed the patterns. Realized how many secrets were kept from us, on all sides. And...”

She glanced towards Jonathan. “I just... around the time Will was born, everything just hit me right there, it hit me that I was *trapped*. So I contacted some old friends, pretended I needed them for a mission, and they got me a getaway car, which I ditched before I got to the place they thought we were meeting. Thought I could hide in Hawkins; nobody was supposed to be there after my mentors were killed in the Library fire, it was considered too dangerous. Guess they changed their minds.”

After a second, Hopper said, “So, you’re saying that these people took the kids? To be super spies or something?”

Joyce nodded. “They’re smart kids. Observant. Good note-takers. Have very specialized talents- Jonathan, you’ve seen Will draw, right? No doubt they want the kids as their next Volunteers.”

“And you want to get them out?” Jonathan asked.

Joyce nodded. “It’s unlikely they’ll be at headquarters already, but if we can find who’s got them, we’re more likely to track them all down, even if we have to do that one by one.”

They were silent for a second, and then Joyce said, “Oh, should probably mention something else, too.”

She slowly kicked off her right shoe under the table, saying, “If you see this, you’re in trouble.”

Then she showed them the tattoo on her ankle, and Jonathan said quietly, "Is that an eye?"

Joyce shook her head, before tracing part of the design. "It's an acronym."

And at that, she said, "Now, Hopper, if you want to join us, we're leaving now. I know where our Headquarters might be. If you don't want, that's alright. I just ask that you don't tell anyone; if they believe you, they'll be loud about what's happening, and the Volunteers will just find out where I am and make things harder."

Hopper paused, glancing between the Byers. Joyce thought for a minute he was going to leave, but after a second he said, "You're going to need help, Joyce."

Joyce smiled slightly, and then she said, "Then, come on. Let's go."

As Jonathan got in the car, Joyce said, "Are you... do you have any other questions?"

He knew what that meant. She was really asking, *Are you mad at me for hiding this from you? Should I have kept it hidden longer? Should I have told you sooner? Should I have told you and Will so none of this happened?*

"It's kind of a blur." Jonathan admitted honestly. "I mean, my Mom was in a cult for her entire childhood, and now they've kidnapped my brother." He paused, and then said, "Did... did they want me?"

"Oh, definitely." Joyce said solemnly as she started the car. "Your photography is quite a talent, and you're a quick learner. They definitely had their eye on you while I was still with them, and you probably would've been grabbed before now if they'd had the chance. It's just luck that they never got you."

Comforting.

Joyce sighed, glancing away. "I should've told you, I just... wanted this to be over with."

"It's alright." Jonathan said. "I get it, I... I just want to get Will back. And the other kids, none of them deserve... that."

They were silent for a second, as they started to drive, watching to make sure Hopper was following. Then Jonathan said, "Nothing's gonna be the same, is it?"

"What?"

"We're never gonna go back. If they're a cult, they'll come after us, we'll have to... hide somewhere else. Hide the kids. Right?"

There was a pause, before Joyce said, "Yes. But... but it'll be okay. I'll make sure nothing happens to you, or the kids. I'll protect you, I *promise*."

"We have a problem."

"Yes, we do!" Kali said, whipping around.

The gang had gathered in an abandoned barn on the outskirts of town, and as Kali jumped down off of the rafters, glaring at Nancy and Steve, the rest of the gang turned around. Dottie had one of those *You're in Trouble Now* faces, while Mick just looked as nervous as always, Funshine was oddly blank, and Axel looked about as pissed as Kali.

"What's this about you *burning down a post office* on our *first day here*?" Kali asked.

Steve cursed under his breath, and Nancy said, "How'd you hear about that? Thought you would be in the woods all day."

"Funshine and Mick went into town and, well, it wasn't that hard to figure out." Kali said, crossing her arms. "We were trying to be lowkey, and all you had to do was *ask* around town!"

"We tried, but the post office was a Volunteer Base. We spotted the symbol on the cards, and the Volunteer stationed there had one of those fucking books."

“And you couldn’t leave it alone this *once*?” Mick asked, glaring up at them.

“We’re going to have to *leave* without finding-” Kali began.

“Oh, yeah, we saw the kids.” Nancy said.

The gang froze, and then Kali said, “You *what*?”

“They were in the office. They ran out the back before we could stop them-” Steve said.

“You let them *run away*?” Kali asked, eyes wide.

“You’re not the only one pissed about this.” Nancy said.

“I think I might be.” Kali said. “You don’t understand, I *need* to find her, before-”

“She’s with my brother.”

Kali grew silent again, while everyone stared even harder at her, and Funshine said, “You have a brother?”

Nancy hesitated, glancing around across the surprised faces, before grabbing Steve’s hand and saying, “Uh, yeah. Yeah. I haven’t seen him since he was a baby- since *I* was a baby, I barely remember... but they called him Mike Wheeler. It’s him.”

“So,” Kali said quietly, “They got your sibling, too?”

Nancy nodded.

“Well,” Kali said, “Guess we have extra motivation to get them safe, don’t we?”

“Do you have any idea where they went?” Mick asked.

“I think they’re trying to get out of town.” Steve said.

“Great, that’s Dottie’s area.” Kali said, glancing over. “Want to track them?”

“How hard can tracking five kids be?” she shrugged.

“Alright. We start now. Pack up.” Kali ordered.

As everyone jumped up, grabbing the minimal things they'd unpacked. Nancy slowly moved to the corner, sliding to the ground.

She was joined by Mick, who sat in front of her and said, “Tough day?”

“I was hoping he wouldn't get dragged into this.” Nancy said quietly. “I mean, I don't know anything about him... *shit*, he's thirteen now. I guess it just never hit me that... that he grew up, too.” Mick nodded slightly, as Nancy continued, “But, like. I'm his big sister. Gotta take care of him, I guess.” She smiled a little. “God, he probably doesn't even remember me.”

“I'm sure he'll like you.” Mick assured her.

“He won't.” Nancy said. “I think he hates me already. But hopefully I can at least get him away from those fucking Volunteers.”

10. El won't tell anyone Shit

CHAPTER TEN

El won't tell anyone Shit

“What do you mean, ‘there aren’t any buses here?’” Lucas asked incredulously.

The kids were all hiding behind a shop, glaring at Max just as she got back from asking someone where the bus station was.

“That’s what she said.” Max threw her hands up, gesturing to the woman across the street, who was walking away, unaware that Max had friends with her. “No bus stations in town. We’ve gotta keep crossing through towns to even find one.”

“How do these people get anywhere?” Dustin asked.

“They drive themselves like responsible adults.” Max rolled her eyes. She paused, and then said, eyes brightening, “I mean, I could steal a car...”

“No.” Lucas and Mike said in unison.

“Come on,” Max groaned, “You *know* I can drive it.”

“That’s illegal.” Mike said.

“So’s child abduction, it evens out.” Max shrugged.

“We’re not stealing a car!” Lucas declared.

“Alright, fine. What do *you* wanna do?” Max crossed her arms, huffing.

“Just walk into another town, find a bus station and go from there.” Lucas said. He turned to El, asking, “So, uh, do you have enough money for a bus?”

El considered, reached into her pocket, and pulled out another handful of cash.

“Where did you *get* all of that?” Dustin asked.

El shrugged. “The others.”

“Others?” Mike asked.

“The...” she thought hard, trying to remember a word they’d used earlier. “Arsonists?”

“Shit, yeah, I keep forgetting you escaped from them.” Mike said.

“You stole their cash?” Dustin looked impressed.

“Stole?” she seemed unfamiliar with the word.

“You know... took without asking?” Dustin clarified.

El considered, then nodded.

“That’s *sick*!” Dustin cheered. “Nice work, Ellie!”

“Uh, why exactly did you steal their money?” Max asked.

El shrugged. “It was pretty.”

“Listen, we can talk when we’ve reached a good place to rest.” Lucas said. “We should start going, we have no idea how big this town is.”

They walked for what felt like hours, not sure if they’d left town at any point or just traveled past some invisible borders. But by the time they’d reached a point where the buildings started narrowing and the streets got longer, the sky was already starting to darken.

“Maybe we can sleep in a hotel.” Lucas suggested.

“They’re not gonna rent out a room to a buncha kids without an adult.” Max said.

"Maybe we can dress two of us up in a trench coat." Dustin said.
"Like in the Movies."

"That's the worst idea you've ever come up with." Mike said, though he was probably wrong.

"Where else are we supposed to stay?" Dustin asked.

They stopped for a second, staring at each other. El glanced to their left, where there was a small alley between buildings, a dumpster pushed in the far corner, and then moved a bit towards it.

"El?" Mike asked, as they followed her with their gaze. "What are you doing?"

El stood on her tiptoes to pull the lid of the dumpster up, peering inside. After a second, Mike followed her, glancing in, too. It wasn't as dirty as he thought it would be, but there were lots of trashbags inside, so maybe he just couldn't see.

"Are you looking for-" Mike began, but as he talked, El moved, going to the side of the dumpster. And then, as Mike stared, she rushed and pushed. It moved a lot faster than Mike expected, and El pushed it right into the side of one of the buildings. She leapt on top, staring up at the closest window, which was close to the roof, quite a while above them. Unfazed, she leapt up, gripping onto a drainpipe, and using it to climb.

"What the *fuck*?" Lucas said as the other kids rushed to where Mike was standing, dumbfounded, watching her climb up.

"How the hell is she doing that?" Max asked, eyes wide.

"El, you're gonna fall!" Mike called, very worried.

However, El kept going up the drainpipe, jumping onto the top windowsill and peering in. After a second, she moved her hand to the lock, and then she pushed the window open and climbed inside.

"Oh, holy shit." Dustin muttered, wide-eyed.

"How did she do *that*?" Lucas asked.

"Is she breaking into the building?" Max asked. "Why is she doing that? She's gonna get caught!"

"Unless the building is empty," Mike said. "But what are the chances?"

El climbed out the window, jumped to the drainpipe, and slid down. As she looked at the group, she said, "Empty."

"The building's empty?" Mike asked.

She nodded, and Lucas said, "Holy shit, El, how did you learn how to do *that*?"

El looked confusedly towards him. "What?"

"The whole..." Dustin said, gesturing wildly towards the building. "The building-climbing thing!"

Somehow, she looked even more confused. "You can't...?" They shook their heads, and her look of complete bewilderment grew. "But... it's easy."

"It's really not." Max said. "Especially for these nerds, they couldn't climb a *ladder* without help."

"That was *one time*." Lucas muttered.

El still stared at them, her complete confusion still growing. Finally, Mike said, "Uh, we can probably break in the back. Find somewhere to sleep, wake up early, and then head back out. We can find a bus or a train or something tomorrow, get home."

They looked over at him, and Dustin said quietly, "You really think we'll get home?"

Mike nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, of course."

They all had a feeling in the back of their heads that it wouldn't be that easy, but none of them said so.

The building was empty; it seemed to be some kind of storage building, but it was closed for the night. Originally, they'd planned to go to the top floor and sleep in the room with the window, in case they needed to escape, but once they got in the room, they'd turned to look at the window, and they'd all instantly frozen.

"Oh." Lucas had managed to say, while the rest of them just stared at it, fear suddenly gripping them. The only one who didn't seem terrified was El, but she did look a bit concerned at the everybody's reaction.

Mike finally moved over to the window, shutting it, but that didn't help; El had proven it was quite easy to open it. Finally, they just moved to a nearby room, moving some boxes around to make enough room for them to sleep on the floor. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it was better than sleeping on the floor.

After a few uncomfortable minutes of silence, though, Lucas turned to El and said, "How'd you learn to climb up buildings?"

Mike glared at him, but El, after a second, mumbled, "I was taught."

"By who?"

She flinched. "I don't... I was small."

"Small?" Dustin asked. "Like, how old? Four? Five? Six?"

El considered, and then considered, shutting her eyes and probably doing math in her head. Finally, she said, "Three?"

"Holy *fuck*." Max said.

"Who teaches toddlers how to climb buildings?" Mike asked.

El looked confused. "You really didn't..."

"No, I couldn't even *read* when I was three." Dustin said, which only seemed to confuse El more.

"Why did they teach you how to climb a building?" Max asked.

El was silent for a bit, and they were worried she wasn't going to answer, until she said, "In case."

"In case what?"

She shrugged.

"What else did they teach you to do?" Max asked.

El considered, before saying, "Lots."

"So, uh, when..." Mike began, waiting for her to look at him before continuing, "When did you get kidnapped?"

She was confused for a second, then shrugged.

"So they've had you for a long time? They're your family right, so have they had you... forever?"

"Oh, fuck," Max said, "I bet they'll follow us to try and find her."

El looked panicked, jumping to her feet. Mike jumped up, too, saying, "Calm down, guys! El, it's okay-"

She shook her head. "Papa can't find me. He can't-"

"He won't. He won't." Mike promised her, moving over and grabbing her hand. She flinched, but didn't pull away, as he continued, "He won't. We're going to go home, and the police there are trustworthy, and they'll help us. You won't have to go back. It's okay."

She stared at him for a second, and Mike said, "Are you okay?" She nodded slightly, and as they sat back down, Mike said, "Guys, stop bothering her. Let's just go to sleep, and tomorrow we'll go back home, our parents will fix everything, the police'll find Will, everything'll be okay."

"Why can't we find Will?" Lucas asked.

Everyone was silent for a second, before Mike said, "What?"

"Well, why can't we?" Lucas said. "Our parents know we're okay

now. We've told the police what's going on. We could try going back to the building, they've gotta be gone by now, see if we can find clues on where they went..."

Mike sighed. "I... I wanna go find him, but... what are we supposed to do?"

"We can wing it." Lucas said. "What's the alternative? Just going back to our lives and waiting for him to get found? El's been there God knows how long, if nobody could get *her* out-"

"Don't say that!" Dustin said, looking panicked and instinctively grabbing Max's hand. "Don't say that, she was with a bunch of arsonists, our kidnappers weren't... were they?"

They all looked to El, who seemed very, very uncomfortable.

"El? Why did they try to burn that building down?" Mike asked carefully.

El shook her head, shutting her eyes tight and playing with the hem of her jacket.

"El? Do you know?" Max asked.

"Stop it." she said.

"Why won't you tell us?" Lucas asked.

"Leave her alone!" Mike yelled quickly

"Stop defending her! She knows stuff she's not telling us!"

"She's scared! You're scaring her!"

"*Stop it!*" El suddenly screamed, furious. "Stop fighting! *Stop it!*" They fell silent for a second, and then she said again, "Stop it..."

"El..." Mike began.

"They're *bad people*." El said. "They're bad men. They're bad men and we can't go back."

"We're... we're not gonna go back to them." Lucas said. "We're just gonna go in for Will."

"He might need our help." Max said quietly. "He... he got himself captured so we could get out, we owe it to him to try and save him."

They were silent for a second, and that was when it all hit them exactly what Will had done. El, meanwhile, just stared at the ground and shook her head, still looking incredibly upset.

Finally, Mike leaned over, grabbing El's hand again. "El?" he asked cautiously.

"We can't go back..." she whispered.

"El, whatever happens, whatever we do... we won't let anyone take you again." Mike said. "I promise, okay?"

El turned to look at him, a little confused. "Promise?"

"Yeah." It took Mike a second to realize she was asking for a definition. "Oh. Oh, shit, um..."

"A promise is something you can't break." Max said quickly.

"Yeah." Dustin added. "Ever."

"And we're friends now." Mike said. "Friends don't break promises, right?"

"Friend?"

Jesus fuck.

"Well, that's..." Mike paused. "Someone you'd do anything for. Someone you like being with, someone you trust and love and... don't you have anyone like that?"

El wiped her eyes on her sleeve, considering for a bit. Slowly, she nodded, but after a few moments of silence, they realized she wasn't going to elaborate.

“That’s why we need to find Will.” Lucas said. “He’s our friend. One of our best friends. We can’t leave him.”

Mike paused; they could tell he was still considering whether they should go back or go away. “The adults should be able to handle it...”

“The adults are God knows how far away.” Lucas said.

“So are our kidnappers.” Mike said. “And we’ve already walked for like two days. Look, let’s just... let’s just get back home, and tell the Chief everything, and then we’ll see what they do. If they can’t do anything, we’ll find a way to sneak out.”

“There’s no way my parents will let me out of my house for the rest of my life after this.” Lucas said.

“Yeah, my Mom’s gonna lock me up.” Dustin said. “I mean, we got *kidnapped*, she’s probably terrified.”

Max and Mike both stayed silent, sharing a quick look. El kept staring into space.

Finally, Mike said, “We’ll figure it out. We’ve gone too far to turn back now. We’ll find Will, no matter how long it takes. And we’ll get El safe, too, as well as the rest of us.”

After a second, Max very quietly said, “Promise?”

Mike nodded, and they were silent the rest of the night.

11. Nancy and Steve run into some Old Friends

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nancy and Steve run into some Old Friends

“They definitely went more through town.” Dottie said casually, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “Probably headed for the trains, if I had to guess.”

The gang was standing in an alley as Dottie got back from the slightly-burnt post office, having managed to deduce a trail- which impressed Nancy a bit, seeing as several hours had passed since the incident, and it was quite dark already.

“If they get on the trains, God only knows where they could end up.” Kali said.

“I’d guess they’d try going back home.” Nancy shrugged. “That’s what I would’ve done if I was grabbed at his age and wasn’t told what was going on.”

“So you think they’d head to Hawkins?” Kali asked.

“I doubt they’d make it.” Steve said, flipping a match absentmindedly in his hand. “There are tons of stops at Volunteer bases on the trains. Someone’ll grab them while they’re not looking.”

“Ooh, that won’t end well.” Axel said.

“Especially if *your* side gets to them.” Kali said, gesturing to Nancy and Steve, the former of whom flipped her off. “They’ll just bring her right back to her piece of shit mentor.”

“We got that.” Nancy crossed her arms. “We just know... we just know that we need to get to them. We can probably hijack a car, get to the train station before they do.”

“It’s the middle of the night and we’re in the middle of town, where

are we going to find cars?" Steve asked.

"Cars are everywhere if you know where to look." Dottie giggled.

"And so are *cops*." Mick said, which didn't stop Dottie's laughter. "We'll get caught so quickly-

"Not if we're careful." Kali shrugged.

"We've stolen cars before." Steve said.

"Yeah, and we've *planned* around it." Mick said. "We've planned before, we can just sit down for a second and-

"We don't have time." Kali said. "The trains could leave any moment, and who knows when the kids'll get there, who could get to them first-"

"Shut up." Nancy said.

"I'm not going to-

"Seriously, *shut up*."

Finally, they did fall silent, and they all heard what Nancy had-distant laughter. Someone was approaching.

"So? Someone's walking at night." Axel shrugged.

Nancy shook her head, as Steve listened closely, and his face fell. Funshine noticed their expressions first, asking, "Is that...?"

"Shit shit shit." Steve muttered.

Nancy took a deep breath, then turned to the others. "If we don't come back in ten minutes, go find the kids without us. We'll catch up."

"What's going on?" Kali asked, eyes widening. "Where are you-

Nancy moved forwards, giving her as quick a hug as she could, and then she grabbed Steve's hand, and they rushed out of the alley, leaving them behind.

“Think we’ll actually catch up?” Steve asked.

“We’ll have to see.” Nancy said. “What are *they* doing in town?”

“Maybe they set the fire? At Headquarters?”

“Their mentors are money-based, not arson-based, it’s unlikely.”

The two of them headed towards the sound of laughing, and when they got close enough to see the images of people walking towards them, Nancy called out, forcing a smile onto her face, “Hey, didn’t realize this was a sad occasion, assholes!”

They heard a bunch of happy calls, and Steve said, “God, I missed them.”

“Focus on the problem.” Nancy whispered. “We’ve got kids to protect. Let’s find out why they’re here.”

The others caught up, and it took Nancy only a second to notice that only two of their old classmates were there- Tommy and Carol, of course.

“Hey, fuckers!” Tommy said, his arm around the laughing Carol. “What’re you doing in town? You get called in to?”

“Shouldn’t we be a bit quieter?” Nancy shot Steve a quick look- *called in* did *not* sound good. “Seeing as we’re in a town-”

“Everyone’s asleep, and these are business buildings.” Tommy said. “If anyone’s actually around, we haven’t seen them.”

“Your chaperones here?” Carol asked.

“Fucked off to Maine.” Steve said. “So we went on a little roadtrip.”

“Good. Our chaperones keep telling us to sit down and shut up.” Carol rolled her eyes. “As if we haven’t already set shit on fire before. We just wanted to get out and walk for a bit before we leave tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Nancy asked.

“Yeah. We got called into town cause we’re nearby, but tomorrow we’ve gotta report back to Headquarters or some shit.” Tommy shrugged.

“Hey, what’re you ‘called in’ for?” Steve asked. “This sounds more interesting than the shit we were doing.”

“Someone fucked up an arson,” Carol explained, “And some kids the *others* tried to recruit got away with one of our apprentices. A couple of us who happened to be nearby got called in to try and track them, all that jazz. But we’ve only been here, like, a day, and already a bunch of us have been called back, apparently cause they decided this apprentice is super dangerous or something and only people who’ve trained with her are allowed to track her. We’re gonna be given instructions at HQ.”

“Oh, is HQ nearby now?” Nancy asked. “Last I checked it was in Florida.”

“Yeah, that got demolished. It’s a couple towns over now.” Tommy said.

“Figures.” Steve said.

Nancy paused, and then said, “Hey, Steve, need to talk for a sec.” She dragged him off while Tommy said something to Carol that made her laugh, and Nancy wasn’t really sure she wanted to know what.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Steve said, “They’ll be gone by morning. That’s good, right?”

“But they’re receiving some kind of instruction at Headquarters.” Nancy replied. “They might have a plan to find the kids. We’ve gotta follow it and get to them before anyone else can.”

“What about Kal and the Gang?”

“I told her we’d find them, and we will. We follow the kids, eventually they’ll turn up. Kali’s here for the girl, remember, and the rest of them are here for Kal.”

Steve paused, glancing towards Tommy and Carol, who looked like

they were going to start walking again. He quietly said, "Shit, Nance, how did we get dragged into this? We were just going to go around and burn some crap, now we're trying to bust kids out of training."

"Steve, if you want to go," Nancy interrupted quietly, "I'm not going to stop you. But... but you know what they... what they'd do to us if we stepped out of line. And those kids have been living untrained for thirteen years, they're not gonna go quietly. And if Kali's right about the girl being *worse off* ..." she sighed. "Besides, it's a chance to screw over the Volunteers who want them, and a chance to..."

To meet my brother.

"And, hey, maybe they'll be pissed and want to set stuff on fire, too." Nancy shrugged. "You never know."

Steve stared at her for a second, and then said, "Alright, but you owe me one. If I have to sit through another fucking lecture on why we're important or some shit-"

"I'll bust you out." Nancy sighed, but she smiled, too. "Thank you."

"Also you can't complain about Tommy and Carol, since we're going to be stuck with them."

"Deal."

Then they turned, and Nancy called, "Hey, bitches! Wait up!"

Lucas woke Max up for her watch about two hours into their sleep. Max suspected they weren't going to sleep for very long- they didn't want whoever worked in this building to find them. But as she was sitting by the door, listening for any sounds of doors or windows opening, she heard El sit up. She was silent for a bit, wondering if she was going to go back to sleep, but after a second, she turned, whispering, "Can't sleep?"

El shook her head. Max briefly wondered if she should let El take over, but, well, they still didn't quite trust her. And also, well, Max wasn't entirely sure El wouldn't just take off into the streets, and she

was the only one who knew what was going on. (Also, she didn't seem to have any idea how the world worked, and her being on her own might end badly for her.)

Finally, Max walked over, sitting next to her. "You know, I haven't had a girl friend since before we moved to Hawkins," she admitted.

El stared at her, a little confused, as she said, "Well, I mean, Hawkins girls are nice to me, I was nice to them, we even hung out a couple times, but I've spent most of my time with my boys over there." she gestured to her sleeping friends. "And Will. Not really any reason, we just... clicked. Kinda. I mean, I clicked with Dustin and Lucas once they stopped stalking me, Will and I bonded over video games and art and stuff. Mike took a while because he doesn't like change and I was kind of a wild card, but now we only fake-fight, so that's pretty cool. I think my Mom would like me to hang around girls more, and I know my stepdad would, because they think because I hang around the boys... well, my stepdad's a dick anyway, and my Mom hasn't been a huge fan of me ever since I told her I didn't wanna wear dresses anymore."

She wasn't entirely sure why she was telling El all of this. Hell, she hadn't even told the boys all of this. But El seemed like she was actually listening, even if she didn't quite understand all of it.

Eventually, El asked, "What's... 'step-dad'?"

Max considered. "It's when you have two parents, right? And then they aren't together anymore and one of them marries a new guy, that new guy is your step-dad. And any of his kids are your step-siblings and they're huge assholes who beat the shit outta you whenever they're not at school."

She paused, her face paling. She hadn't let that slip in years, Lucas was the only one she'd told and only because she'd taken to hiding at his place...

El, however, didn't seem to find this off. Though she did slide her hand over Max's in an odd sort-of comfort, she just asked, "Two parents?"

“Yeah. I have my Dad and my Mom.” Max replied, her voice a bit quieter. “But my Dad’s real far away, I don’t see him much, even though he’s great. So I’m stuck with my Mom and stepdad and-” she paused. “Oh, uh, do you... do you have a Mom?”

El shook her head sadly.

“You know what it is?”

She hesitantly nodded. “My sister said...”

“You have a sister?”

El froze, and after a second, she ducked her head, covering her eyes with her hands.

After a second, Max got the drift. “You don’t wanna talk about her?”

El shook her head, and Max was silent for a bit, trying to figure out what to say.

Finally, she said, “Could you teach me how to scale buildings like that?” El turned, looking at her in confusion, as she said, “I mean, I’m not a beginner or anything, I’ve got a lot of practice climbing out of my window and into theirs, but... you moved like a freaking spider. That was amazing. If I could do that... well, it’d be really cool.”

El paused. “I’ve never... taught.”

“You could just show me what you do, and I’ll try to copy.”

After a second, El nodded hesitantly. Max prodded Mike awake to tell him that her and El were going outside- which he probably wouldn’t have accepted as quickly if he hadn’t literally just awoken.

The girls wandered outside, over to the wall El had climbed up. Though it was dark, it wasn’t too hard to see, what with the starlight, the full moon, and the many street lamps. “So, you started by kicking the dumpster over.” Max said. “That seems heavy, how’d you...?”

El gestured down, and Max noticed wheels at the bottom.

“Huh. Okay.”

El then ran over, leaping on top of the dumpster. Max tried the same, but she didn't even come close to jumping on top. After a few tries, El held out her hand and helped Max climb up, while Max's face went as red as her hair. And then El moved over, leaping to the drainpipe and shimmying up, before sliding back down. Max paused, before running and jumping, only barely managing to grab onto the pipe. She flinched as she started to slide down, moving her legs to slow the descent and hold her in place. She gripped hard onto the metal, shutting her eyes and breathing hard, trying to keep herself calm, realizing that she was very high up and was going to get higher, with barely a grip on the pipe.

She finally glanced down, as she saw El looking up, waiting. “What do I do now?” Max asked.

El simply gestured for her to keep climbing.

Max took a deep breath and slowly used her legs to push herself up. Shit, maybe climbing that rope in gym class was worth something after all.

She kept climbing up, and after a second, she called, “You know, uh, you did this a lot faster.”

Either El didn't respond, or Max didn't hear her. Whatever happened, she kept climbing, until she was high enough that she could see the window ledge, several feet away.

“Uh, what do I do now? El?”

Max glanced down briefly, paling at the view of the ground; even in the dark, she could tell she was *very* high up. Maybe this was a bad idea.

El just looked up at her, and gestured for her to jump.

“Really?” Max called. “No tips? No instructions?”

El didn't respond, so Max finally glanced towards the ledge. How *exactly* was she supposed to jump? She didn't want to do this anymore, she wanted to go... but if she slid down the pipe now, she was probably going to lose her grip and fall. She'd lose her grip and fall no matter what she did, probably. Slowly, she moved her legs, planning to just launch herself forwards. She shut her eyes, hoping to God that El had a plan to catch her if she fell, and then she leapt, and barely managed to grip onto the edge of the windowsill, her stomach dropping as she started to slip. She kept her fingers tight around the edge, letting out a small shriek. She took a few panicked breaths before slowly trying to pull herself up. She thanked Heaven silently that she was the one in this situation, she knew for a fact that the boys were little wimps who wouldn't be able to hold on to the windowsill for five seconds. She managed to push herself up, barely managing to balance on the edge of the sill. And then she leaned backwards, and crashed through the window and onto the floor inside, knocking several boxes across the room.

"*Fuck!*" she shrieked.

She managed to stumble up a little, getting on her knees and trying to breathe normally. Within the minute, the door burst open, and she looked up in shock to see Lucas, Mike and Dustin rush in, eyes wide and panicked.

"Max!" Lucas called, rushing forwards and kneeling in front of her, scanning her with his eyes to see if she was hurt.

"Are you okay?" Dustin asked.

"What happened?" Mike asked.

"Oh my Gosh, you look *freaked*, are you-" Lucas paused. "Are you crying? Max?"

The boys surrounded Max, and after a second she pulled herself back, pushing her hair out of her face and trying to stealthily wipe her eyes. "I... I'm fine... was just... climbing with El, freaked out a bit..."

"Where's El?" Mike asked, suddenly looking even more panicked.

“Outside, she was teaching me how to-”

“She’s outside alone?” Lucas asked, eyes wide.

“What if she runs off?” Dustin asked.

“What if she gets hurt?” Mike turned towards the door, looking ready to leave and run out.

At that moment, El climbed in through the window, looking slightly fearfully at the rest of them. They stared for a second, and then Max said, “El, I-”

“What the *fuck*?” Lucas turned to El, looking very pissed.

As El looked over at him, Lucas stood up, saying, “She could’ve died! She could’ve fallen and-”

“Lucas, it’s fine, I asked her to help-” Max said.

“And how did she help?” Lucas asked, turning towards her.

Max didn’t say anything, she just glanced up at El. There was a long pause, before El asked, confusedly, “Help?”

Max paused, breathing hard and she said, “I know... I know I wanted to try this, but... but I had no idea what was going on. I didn’t know what to do, and you didn’t say anything. Couldn’t you help? At all?”

El looked between everyone, just looking more and more bewildered. Lucas looked a bit pissed at her, while Dustin and Mike just looked confused and a bit concerned. Max still had tears building in her eyes. And El still just looked completely confused.

“What...?” she finally said. “Did you want me to do?”

“Uh, teach?” Lucas suggested.

“I did.”

They paused for a second, before Mike asked quietly, “El, how... how did they teach you to climb?”

El paused, and then said, "I climbed."

"What did they do if you fell?"

"I climbed again."

"And your teachers?"

El blinked. "Watched. Made sure I didn't..."

"Didn't die?" Dustin guessed.

El shook her head. "Run."

They were quiet again, as Max still struggled to steady her breathing and they all stared at El, who didn't seem to realize why they all looked so shocked. Lucas dropped his glare, too, pity just washing over his face.

Finally, Mike said, "We should just go now. Not gonna sleep much tonight."

12. Will is just not having a Good Time

CHAPTER TWELVE

Will is just not having a Good Time

It was the third day of capture, and Will was curled up at the edge of his room, listening to see if his chaperones were asleep.

He couldn't try to run; he'd tried and failed several times already. They'd learned to lock the windows and the doors, though they didn't seem to know he could pick the locks yet, so he didn't think that was much more than a way to stall. But he knew there were people everywhere who'd just drag him back to whoever he was with, to get lectured on how he was *safe*, how everything was going to be okay, how he just had to listen and do as he was told and everything would be alright.

He really didn't believe that.

They told him a lot of things he didn't believe, really. Like how they'd gotten permission to kidnap him- first of all, his Mom *never* let someone take him away, no matter the reason. And second, she'd done everything she could to make sure he *couldn't* get kidnapped; she wouldn't have done that if she was planning on letting someone take him away. They'd also told him that he had been recruited into a good and noble organization. Yeah, a good and noble organization that kidnapped him and was now throwing him from place to place.

And place to place it was. He'd been kidnapped only three days ago- or was it four? He didn't care to count- and he'd already been to three places. After headquarters, they decided against explaining things to him and dumped him on some woman in a seaside town. When he tried to swim across the lake, she shipped him off to a man in a vineyard, and when Will almost managed to scale the wall, he'd been dropped off with two adult twins in some odd town. They were way more careful than the last two had been; while they let him know they were impressed with his skillset, they couldn't have him

running off on them.

Not like he could do much running at the moment.

Sometime inbetween his second chaperone and his current ones, they'd put him under some anesthesia or something, which effectively knocked him out for a while. And when he woke up...

They told him it was a normal initiation thing. They'd stopped doing it for a while because of some fucking schism they hadn't wanted to discuss, but were starting it up again. To keep track of their "apprentices", or some shit. One of them said something about needing to know who knew what, no matter what side they were on.

Honestly, Will didn't care why it happened. He just cared that there was some kind of fucking eye tattooed on his ankle now.

He hated looking at it, but they wouldn't let him cover it up for at least two weeks, and he had to wash it twice a day, apparently, or it would get infected, as if he didn't have enough shit to deal with.

But honestly, the tattoo wasn't even the worst part. And getting thrown from stranger to stranger wasn't the worst part, either, even though they kept making him do weird and random shit, like count the number of grapes on a vine, measure the water currents and translate random stuff from morse code. The worst part wasn't even the fact that apparently a bunch of arsonists wanted him dead just because these people abducted him.

No, the worst part was that he was doing all of this completely alone.

He knew that was his own doing. Maybe if he'd had more time to think, he could have come up with a way that they could have all gotten out, he could have run off with his friends and they could've gotten home and everything might've turned out fine. But that didn't happen, and at least the others were probably safe. At least the others had a good shot at getting home.

But that didn't change the fact that he was alone, that his friends were missing, that his brother wasn't there to play him music and cheer him up and teach him how to use a camera, that his Mom was

far away and didn't know where he was and was probably scared out of her mind because he was *gone* and stuck with people who didn't care and just wanted him for some goddamn unexplained reason...

Shit, no. He couldn't cry now. He couldn't cry. Will reached up to wipe his eyes on his sleeve, and then he listened at the door again. Both twins sounded asleep, but... well, if he was going to do this, he was going to have to hurry.

Slowly, very slowly, he picked the lock, hoping to God his chaperones weren't light sleepers, and that extended walking with the new tattoo wouldn't cause many issues. As soon as his door was unlocked, he slowly pulled it open, trying to minimize noise, and he glanced down the hall.

They'd taken up residence in an old house, one that had eyes decorating the walls that matched his new tattoo, eyes that hid some kind of message that Will wasn't sure he could make out. His Chaperones were in the room connecting to his so that they could grab him if he tried to get out the window, which Will was certain was locked and probably booby-trapped. Not that he'd try to go out that way. He didn't quite like looking at the windows much, cause he always had a creeping feeling that something was going to jump out of them...

God, stop thinking. Start moving.

He wasn't trying to run. They'd told him multiple times that most people in the nearby city would just bring him back, and he wouldn't make it a day alone in the woods outside of town. He had no reason to doubt them on *that*, and, plus, he didn't think he could run far even without the woods. No, he had a different destination in mind.

He slid down the railing of the staircase and went to the basement, moving down the stairs as quietly as possible. And once he got to the bottom, he moved as far as he could in the darkness. He would've brought a lantern or a match or something, but he couldn't find any. It didn't matter; he was pretty good at seeing in the dark anyway.

Up ahead, against the wall, was a signal radio. Will stood in front of it, giving his eyes a second to adjust before he started moving the

dials. He knew how to use a radio, of course; he'd learned in a club after school with the other boys. One of the twins was apparently "specializing" in radios- whatever that meant- and so had managed to show it off to Will when he'd arrived. He probably didn't think Will could use it. Well, sucked for him.

What Will knew about this radio was that it didn't broadcast to everyone; it was apparently connecting members of whatever society his abductors were in, with only a few channels open to the public. So Will couldn't just send out a cry for help; God knew how many other enemies were listening in? But, for all he knew, this radio was his only hope, and if he was *caught* sending out a distress call, he could have it locked away from him. He needed this. He needed to send out a message to someone who could help him, but one that his kidnappers wouldn't know.

And that was going to be hard. Since he'd been here, Will noticed they seemed to know a lot of codes, and they were always speaking in riddles to each other, writing out confusing notes, asking him to translate multiple ciphers. So he couldn't use any normal code; they were all fluent in it. But he couldn't use something too obscure; it had to be something that someone who knew him would recognize.

He thought, for perhaps the millionth time since he'd thought up this plan, that maybe this was hopeless. His friends probably had no access to this group's radio, and if... if it was true, that his Mom knew where he was... maybe she did let them- no, no. Even if she knew who these people were, she wouldn't let them take him away. She *wouldn't*. Will couldn't even consider that.

He finally selected a channel- a relatively public one, one anybody could pick up with the right radio. He sat for a second, shutting his eyes.

He had his code. His code that someone who knew him would recognize, but someone who didn't wouldn't realize was a distress call.

This was his only shot. He just had to hope that it was enough.

"So, come on and let me know..."

“Should I stay or should I go?”

“This is it.” Joyce said.

They’d ditched the cars at some hotel quite a few hours ago, and had trekked through a dirt path in the woods since then. Now they were peering through the bushes, staring ahead at an innocent-looking building. If they had just passed through it without knowing what it was, they might have guessed it was a scientific building or animal reserve, studying the forest, or maybe even a hotel or shelter that happened to get a great view of the woods.

“You’re sure?” Jonathan asked.

Joyce nodded. “Went here a lot. Surprised it’s not burned down already.” She turned, glancing between the two boys with her. “Alright. Neither of you have very good spying skills, so I’m just going to break in, find out where everyone is, and get out.”

“Hell no,” Hopper said, “You’re not going in alone.”

“Hop, your version of ‘sneaking in’ is to walk in with a gun and hope nobody tries to stop you.” Joyce sighed. “And you’re going to be going into a building full of trained spies who wouldn’t hesitate to kill you to keep themselves hidden.”

“I could-” Jonathan said.

“I’m not risking that.” Joyce said, her voice softening slightly. “Jonathan, I can’t risk them getting to you... just stay here with Hopper and I’ll be back soon.”

“I still don’t think-” Hopper began.

“Trust me,” Joyce smirked slightly, “I’ll be in and out before you know it.”

Joyce had been worried, at first, that she might have gotten a bit

rusty, having been living in relative peace for a little over a decade. But she'd figured out pretty quickly that a lot of it was like riding a bike; when she heard someone coming, she had silently ducked into the closet and grabbed a potential weapon before she could even process what had happened. Joyce wasn't sure if that was good or bad, but it was helpful for this situation.

She maneuvered around the halls, trying to remember where the files on apprenticed children were kept. She managed to get to what she thought was the right floor before she had her first close call; two people passed around the corner just as Joyce did, and she barely managed to duck away and into an empty classroom before they could see her.

She managed to finally find a room of filing cabinets, and she started digging through them, incredibly relieved that they didn't seem to be locked; although, she thought she remembered the Volunteers constantly locking their stuff...

As she pulled out papers, she felt herself get more and more confused. There seemed to be a lot of marked maps, a lot of notes written in codes she didn't even care to translate in her head after she realized the first few lines were just about other agents out in the field. And there were tons of grainy photos of different buildings and blurry people- God, didn't they have any good photographers yet?

By the time she got to the third drawer, her bewilderment was building into a sense of foreboding. There didn't seem to be any files on the apprentices when this was a school- it *was* still a school, wasn't it? She hadn't seen any children, but that wasn't unusual, they could all be out in a class or evacuated in a fire drill or...

Fire drills.

Slowly, very slowly, Joyce realized something. The room was too bright. It was late in the day, and she could see fine; after the Schism had worsened, the Firefighters had resorted to almost completely banning matches, or any type of fire.

So why were there lanterns in the room?

Shit. Shit, that's why the building was still around. It hadn't been burned. It'd been taken over.

She had to get out, *now*.

Joyce shoved all the papers back into the drawer, slamming it shut and turned, intending to rush out the door, maybe climb out a window in order to get out faster.

Unfortunately, at that moment, the door swung open.

Two teenagers stared at her, and she stared back.

And then the girl said, "Steve, you said this room would be empty."

13. Nancy's just kinda the Wild Card

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nancy's just kinda the Wild Card

Nancy and Steve arrived at Headquarters early in the morning. Tommy and Carol's chaperones were a little confused as to why they were separated from their own guardians, but agreed to let them tag along on the ride back. Steve spent most of the time catching up with the other teens, laughing about things that had happened and how dumb the adults were (they were sure the adults weren't listening to what was happening in the back of the car, they never did). Nancy spent most of her time flipping matches in her hands. She wished their side didn't look down on Commonplace books, she could really use one right about now. If they were going to get the kids away, they needed a plan.

She thought, for the millionth time, that maybe they were doing something wrong. If their organization wanted the children, why should they stop them? Maybe they should just grab them for their side and be done with it. After all, they'd had similar initiations, just at younger ages. (She wondered why they waited so long for these kids, why they waited so long before breaking into Hawkins again.) These kids could learn to suck it up and deal, they'd all been through worse. And the girl Kali was worried about... well, maybe Nancy could just put in a good word to switch her mentor. Couldn't be too hard, the higher-ups seemed to like her a lot.

But... well, she'd seen the look on that kid's face when he saw her-the look on her *brother's* face, God, wasn't that a weird fucking feeling? Her baby brother, who she hadn't seen in over a decade, was running around escaping from Volunteers and hanging out with a "dangerous" escapee apprentice.

He didn't look much like her, but then again, she hadn't seen him for long, maybe they were similar and she just didn't notice. She wondered if he looked like their parents. She hadn't seen them since

she was six, she barely remembered them. Hell, she barely remembered Mike. He'd learned to walk before she was recruited, and she remembered that he kept chasing her around the house, following her wherever she went with wide eyes, fascinated by everything his big sister did. She'd found it a bit annoying, if she remembered right, but she also liked being the center of his attention. She liked being a role model.

She wondered why her recruiters left him behind the night they'd grabbed her. Maybe they thought he was too young- no, that wasn't right, there were Volunteers who'd been taken as babies. Maybe he just hadn't been in the house at the time, but where would a two-year-old be? Maybe they just... thought he wouldn't be useful.

He could be. He could help her, she could teach him what she knew, he could learn from her again...

But everytime she got to that conclusion, she just remembered the pure panic in his eyes as he saw her, the anger she'd felt from him when he rushed forwards to rip the girl away from her; he wasn't very strong, but she'd been so surprised she'd just let him run off. And the confusion on his face when she recognized him, and he didn't know her.

He didn't even *fucking* know her.

Well... if these kids didn't want anything to do with the department, then Kali could take care of them. Kali could protect them, she knew. They'd be safe with her, unless they... unless they *wanted* to go with her.

If Mike, or one of his friends, wanted to Volunteer, she wouldn't stop them.

But that didn't mean she couldn't help give them a choice.

When they arrived at HQ, they filtered in through the small crowd of other people, who looked very annoyed that they had to be here, and that they all had to be in one place without the promise of burning

something later.

Some person informed them that the apprentice was dangerous, was very good at basically everything, would only respond to somebody she knew, all that bullshit. They did stress, though, that it was important all findings of her whereabouts be reported directly back, as she also had four potential apprentices with her. Nancy was bouncing on her heels the entire time, playing with her ponytail and trying desperately not to cry from boredom.

As soon as the crowd started dispersing, Steve pulled her aside. "Look, if they know anything, they'll have it filed away. My old chaperone showed me how the system works, we can look through it."

"I doubt they have anything, they gathered us all up to tell them if we did." Nancy said.

"It could be that they just want us out of the way, so their 'specialized trainers' can grab the girl or some shit. What did Kal say her name was again?"

"Keep your voice down." Nancy said, though she did consider that option. Finally, she said, "It doesn't hurt to check."

"Should be empty right now, they only file things when they absolutely have to." Steve said, starting to direct her down a hall. "You know how much we hate paperwork and shit."

"And if it's not?"

"It will be, don't worry."

Of course, when they finally reached the right hall, and finally opened the right door, they found themselves face-to-face with a nervous-looking woman neither of them knew.

They stared for an instant, and then Nancy said, "Steve, you said this room would be empty."

"Shut up." Steve said, before turning to the woman. "Sorry, we're just looking for the storage room..."

The woman kept staring, and then she said, “No, no, it’s fine, I was just... also lost, I... I think I need to get to the exit...”

Nancy paused, staring at the woman, who started forwards, as if to pass by. “Are you with the group looking for the kids?”

The woman paused. “Uh, uh, yeah.”

“Everyone’s downstairs.” Steve said.

“I’ll get there, then.”

At that moment, though, Nancy peered over the woman’s shoulder, and she held out a hand to stop her. “Why is the file cabinet open?” she asked.

Steve looked, too, confused. The woman shut her eyes, and she whispered, “*Shit.*”

“Were you re-filing?” Steve asked. “Most people don’t do that.”

“Um...”

“Did you get any news on the kids?” Nancy asked.

“Listen, I’ve gotta go-”

Steve suddenly picked up on what was happening, and he stepped forwards slightly, looking a little pissed. “Wait. Who exactly are you?”

“No one, I-”

“Are you stealing our shit?”

“No-”

Nancy gaped, fury suddenly filling her. “Are you on the other side?”

“*Fuck* no!”

“What are you doing here?” Nancy asked.

“And don’t lie.” Steve said, moving slightly to block the way out, as the woman was starting to look like she was about to break past them and bolt.

“We can bring you straight to our bosses.” Nancy threatened, reaching into her pocket to grip onto her box of matches.

The woman’s eyes suddenly hardened, and Nancy flinched back a little. “You are *not* doing that.” she said, in such a strong tone that Nancy almost just moved to let her by.

Steve, meanwhile, just kept staring. “Why are you *here*?” he asked.

The woman sighed. “I’m here for my son.”

Oh, fuck.

The teens kept staring at her, and then the woman said, “He’s been kidnapped by *you* fucks, and I want him back. I thought you might have files but *apparently* I’m in the wrong headquarters-”

“The other side’s headquarters have files on apprentices?” Nancy asked, eyes wide.

“Shit.” the woman said again.

“You mean, like, how to track them?”

The woman’s eyes narrowed again, and she said, “If you *dare* go near them-”

“No, no, you don’t get it.” Nancy glanced behind her to make sure the hall was empty, and then she said, “We... is he with his friends? Other recruits?”

The woman looked surprised. “How did you...?”

“I think we’re after the same kids.” Nancy said, eyes wide. “Are they the Hawkins kids?” After a pause, in which the woman kept staring at them, as if trying to decipher whether or not they were a threat, she added, “I... we know one of the girls they’re with. We’re trying to find them and bring them to a friend who thinks she can get them

safe...”

The woman got that dark look again, and she said, “I know you’re Firestarters, and if you’re lying to me...”

“Look, I swear to *God*, that’s why we were here in the first place, we wanted to see if there *were* files on where the kids might be-”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

Nancy paused. She glanced towards Steve. She felt like maybe telling her she was Nancy Wheeler might help, but... she also didn’t know if she could trust *her* . For all she knew, she was someone from the other side going after their missing apprentices.

“You don’t.” she finally said. “But I can get you out of this building, I can help you find the kids- in fact, Steve, get the files.”

“Are you sure?”

Nancy scanned the woman quickly, and then said, “Yeah.”

Steve moved past, going towards one cabinet, knowing exactly where what they wanted was. He opened a drawer, muttering something about “Damn Jack never locking this shit,” and then he pulled out some papers. He flipped through them, and then said, “Not much on the Hawkins kids, but it does say the Volunteers are interested in them, and... oh, here’s the runaway- *shit*, there’s no way that’s her skillset.”

The woman moved, peering over his shoulder at the papers. She picked one up, her eyes hardening. “Where did they get this information?”

“It’s not much, and probably just stuff they stole from burned HQs.” Steve shrugged.

“How long have they known...” The woman paused, and then sighed. “We’re taking these with us.”

“They’ll notice they’re gone.” Nancy said.

“They won’t.” Steve replied.

The woman shoved the papers into her jacket, and then said, “Still not sure I trust you, but at least you’re not throwing me at the other Firestarters, so...”

“We *can* prove it to you in another way.” Nancy said, as she glanced towards Steve. “We can take you to... I know where the new Firefighter Headquarters are.”

She wasn’t supposed to say that. Their plan was to go set it on fire as soon as the apprentices were let out for testing, to minimize casualties. They wanted to get to it before the other Firestarters, to show that they were useful, that they could be full Volunteers.

But this was for her brother. They could prove themselves some other way.

The woman’s eyes widened, as Steve said, “Let’s start from the beginning. I’m Steve, this is-”

Nancy interrupted, saying the first name that came to her head. “Lydia.” Steve didn’t react, but Nancy knew he’d ask her about that later.

The woman paused, and then she turned, shutting the file cabinet behind her. Then she turned back, introducing herself. “Joyce Byers.”

The name clicked in Nancy’s head, but she managed to keep her face blank as she said, “There’s a tunnel out back, nobody should be using it. Follow us.”

When Joyce was far enough ahead in the tunnels- she seemed to know them well, Nancy made a mental note to ask about that later- Steve asked, “Alright, explain what we’re doing *now*.”

“She’s definitely connected to the Other Side.” Nancy said quickly. “Either she’s telling the truth and she didn’t want her kid recruited, or she’s trying to track them down to finish recruitment. Whatever the reason, she knows how to find files on them, and even if the

Volunteers don't know where they are, they'll have valuable information- skillsets, family ties, possibly even observed patterns."

"And you're going by Lydia because...?"

"If she's a Volunteer, don't want her knowing where Nancy Wheeler is, do we?"

Steve sighed. "And I'm just coming along."

"You can turn back."

"I think we've established I'm not doing that. Just kinda wish the last few days hadn't been so fucking wild, you know?"

At that moment, Joyce doubled back, glaring at them. "What are you talking about?"

"The kids. What do you know about where they are?" Nancy said quickly. "Oh, turn left here. We'll only have a few feet before the exit."

"I know the *others* have them." Joyce said.

"Oh, that's where you're wrong." Steve said.

Joyce paused, glaring in the darkness. "What?"

"We ran into them a few towns back." Nancy said. "Unfortunately they ran, mostly because we were busy setting shit on fire."

"You saw them?" Joyce asked, suddenly interested. "Did you see Will?"

"I don't know, there were three boys there." Nancy said.

"Three?" Joyce sounded incredibly worried.

"Yeah. Three boys, two girls."

"No, no, there should be four." Joyce said. "Will, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin."

Nancy paused at Mike's name, but shook her head. "No, there were definitely only three boys."

"Didn't the Volunteers manage to keep one with them?" Steve asked, just as they stopped under the trapdoor, and he reached up to open it.

"Shit, yeah, Kal did say that." Nancy said.

This did nothing to help Joyce's nerves. "They're split up? A bunch of them are running around *alone*?"

"Well, technically they're running around with a dangerous, runaway apprentice." Steve said.

"Not helping." Nancy muttered, just as the door opened.

"Wait." Joyce grabbed Nancy's hand, stopping her from climbing out. "Wait, who stayed behind?"

"I don't *know*, I don't know their names!" Nancy said, almost forcefully.

Joyce paused. "My son, Will, he's small, about this height, brown hair, brown eyes..."

Nancy thought back. "Curly hair?"

"No."

She shook her head. "Wasn't with them."

Joyce shut her eyes tight, taking a deep breath. "Oh my God." she muttered. "Oh my God, whoever has him... I'm gonna fucking kill them."

Steve paused, before saying, "Sounds good."

Jonathan looked up, confused as his Mom crawled out of a hole in the ground and then rushed towards him, followed by two teens. As

Hopper asked, "Who are these kids?" Jonathan simply watched them. The boy was tall, brushing his dark hair out of his eyes as he surveyed them, looking as if he was scanning for a threat. The girl was remarkably pretty, her hair pulled back into a ponytail and her hands in her pockets, fumbling with something inside.

"Hop, Jonathan, these are Steve and Lydia." Joyce said. "They're in the cult."

"Department." the two teens said in unison.

"They're going to help us find the kids." Joyce ignored them. "Already got us files. And these are my associates. Hopper is the Hawkins Police Chief, Jonathan is my oldest son."

"Ah, the Volunteers didn't want you?" Lydia asked, crossing her arms and eying him.

"Uh..." Jonathan wasn't sure how to answer that.

"They couldn't find him." Joyce responded. "Now, kids, if you're going to help us, you're going to have to make sure your friends don't follow you."

"They probably didn't even notice we were here." Lydia shrugged. "Our Chaperones are long gone and if Tommy and Carol find out we're gone, I doubt they'll care."

"I think-" Steve began, and then he paused. "Actually, yeah, they'll just think we got sent off."

"Alright," Joyce turned towards the teens, a fire behind her eyes. "Which way to the Headquarters?"

The teens paused, glancing at each other, as if having a silent conversation. Finally, Lydia said, "It's a long trip. Very far, and there's no telling where the runaways will end up."

"Kali's nearby, and she can try and contact us if she spots them." Steve said. "If her new idea works, that is."

"They have a radio, too." Lydia replied. "Anyway, it's about a five-

day trip. Anyone up for it?”

Joyce nodded, and after a second, Jonathan did to. Hopper was watching the kids warily, looking almost concerned *for* them. Finally, he said, “Of course.”

“Good, let’s get started.” Lydia clapped her hands together. “You all have a car, or do I need to steal one?”

14. Jumping off of Trains is good Exercise

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jumping off of Trains is good Exercise

The kids got to the train station before it was even morning, while the sky was still dark. They waited in the alley for a while, as El emptied her pockets of whatever money she'd managed to steal. Lucas counted out what they had, and then he and Dustin went in to buy tickets. When they came back, along with their change, Lucas said, "It leaves in ten minutes. El, you been on a train?" She nodded. "Okay, so, they didn't seem concerned that we were going on without a parent in early morning, but you never know who else might be on the train, so we've gotta make sure to keep a low profile. It doesn't go straight to Hawkins, but it'll drop us off near enough for us to walk."

"Okay." Mike nodded, turning to the others. "We all okay with that?"

"What option do we have?" Max shrugged, staring down at the ground.

So they boarded the train, keeping their heads low and trying not to look closely at the adults, none of whom seemed to care much about them, so that was good. They found their seats, which were in an almost-empty compartment; only three other people were there, and they all looked like they were on a business trip or something. The kids all waited until the train took off before they dared to breathe a sigh of relief.

Lucas and Max moved to sit by the door, glancing through the window every now and again to make sure nobody was coming towards them. Dustin ended up sitting in a window seat, staring outside to watch the landscape pass by. El started fiddling with the spyglass she'd had in her pocket, and Mike tried his best to entertain himself.

After spending about an hour trying to count signs out the window,

and trying to guess what kind of business the adults were in, and playing with his jacket enough to cause a small tear in the fabric, Mike finally reached into his pocket, pulling out his notebook and pencil and starting to sketch. He wasn't a very good artist, like Will was; he was much better at writing, creating, all that cool stuff. But sometimes sketching was a nice stress reliever, and he also wasn't really thinking of anything good to write at the moment.

He first started by trying to draw El's face, but that didn't turn out very good, so instead he drew the spyglass for a bit. And then, after a pause, he drew what he remembered of her tattoo. He hadn't seen it since she'd shown them the first time, and he was pretty sure it was probably not a good likeness, but-

He was so focused on his drawing he didn't notice someone was behind him until he felt a tap on his shoulder, and he jumped, turning to see El behind him, watching him draw.

"Oh, fuck, uh... how long have you been..." Mike asked.

Instead of answering, El just pointed to the tattoo sketch, and Mike felt his face go red. "Uh, I just thought... it looked kinda cool, so I just- I'm sorry, it's not that good-"

El slid onto the seat beside him, still looking over at the paper. Mike put it on the table, still feeling incredibly embarrassed, only to be shocked when El picked up the notebook, looking curiously. After a second, she took his pencil and sketched right next to his drawing, doodling the eye as well. Mike watched, fascinated, as she drew; she wasn't much better than him, but she seemed to know the symbol very well, almost instinctively sketching the lines, biting her lip slightly as she concentrated. By the time she was done, Mike noticed that he had remembered most of it, except for one line here or there.

"What does... what does the symbol mean?"

El paused for a second, watching him curiously, and then she used the pencil to trace some of the lines on the eye. Mike watched, and then narrowed his eyes. Hold on, that looked almost like...

"Is that a 'V'?" Mike asked, pointing. After El nodded, and traced

again, Mike said, “VD? No? Uh... oh, is that a...”

El shook her head quickly, glancing worriedly around the room. Dustin was almost asleep, pressed against the window, and Lucas and Max were having a quick conversation about their clothes, which hadn’t been washed since before the abduction. The other passengers were having some kind of silent conversation. Though nobody seemed to be listening, El still looked nervous. Then, her eyes lit up, a sudden idea forming in her head. She sketched, right under the eye, three letters.

VFD.

And then she erased it quickly, glancing over her shoulder. But Mike saw it, and he looked up at El. “What does that mean?”

Once again, she shook her head.

“Well, um...” Mike paused. “I’m gonna... try to sleep. Are you tired? No? Okay, uh... wake me up if anything happens.”

He curled up against the window and tried to sleep, not noticing that El didn’t put the notebook down. Slowly, she flipped the page, and started to write.

It took a few hours before Lucas noticed something was wrong.

Over the hours, he’d managed to find them food from another compartment, which was great, as they hadn’t eaten in forever. It wasn’t *great* food, but it was better than nothing. Nobody seemed bothered by the dirty, parentless kids running around, which was a bit worrying, to be honest.

At this point, Max was busy trying to brush her hair with a fork she’d stolen- it got very knotted over the course of the last few days. Mike and Dustin were asleep, El had been furiously writing for a while- she’d only stopped when Lucas had woken Mike up to pass him some food- and, well, Lucas had mainly just been keeping an eye on things.

And now he knew something bad was happening.

The adults had left the compartment, apparently to meet some friends, and they hadn't been back in a while. Normally that wouldn't be a problem- they wanted to talk to their friends, who could blame them for being gone a while? But then Lucas had looked out the window to the next compartment, after helping Max untangle the fork from the back of her head, and noticed that it was a lot more empty than it had been earlier.

"Max..." Lucas said carefully. "Max, wake up the others."

Though she got a panicked look in her eye, Max didn't stop to question, instead rushing over to shake Dustin awake. El seemed to pick up on the urgency, and managed to wake Mike, handing him his notebook and pencil back before he was even processing what was going on.

"What's up?" Dustin asked, as Mike confusedly pocketed his belongings, and El jumped to her feet, also peering into the next compartment and paling.

"Nobody's in the next compartment." Lucas said.

"Maybe there's an emergency?" Max asked.

"Then why didn't anyone tell us?" Lucas retorted.

El rushed to the other side of the compartment, looking through that window. She shook her head again; empty.

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit." Dustin said.

"You don't think our kidnappers got here, do you?" Max asked.

"If they're with the police, it's not impossible they're with the train-managers." Mike paused, still blinking the exhaustion out of his eyes. "Train-managers, that's not the word I'm looking for, is it?"

"It doesn't matter what word we're looking for," Max replied, "Because if they're on the train, we have to get off."

"You can't just jump off a train!" Dustin said, eyes wide. "It's not like the movies, you could die super easily!"

“Do you know how to not die?” Mike asked.

“Yeah, but-”

“Then we’ll do that. How do we get out?”

“Well, we’ll have to hope it’s not moving very fast, because if it is, we will either break all our limbs or crack our heads open.” Dustin said. “But to best survive, we need to wait until it goes uphill, jump into grass if we can, and we need to roll over one shoulder and then into a ball.”

“Think we can get out the windows?” Max asked.

“Looks like it could work.” Mike said, moving to open the window. They flinched at the wind bursting into the compartment, and then Mike looked outside. “There’s a hill up ahead; Lucas, lock the door!” he called.

Lucas fiddled with the door lock until it snapped, and Dustin said, “You know, maybe we’re overreacting, we don’t need to-”

The door handle suddenly wiggled; someone on the other side was trying to open it. The kids froze, and El slowly moved to the window, pushing past a frozen Lucas. She looked out, and instantly jumped back. “Bad men!” she yelled.

“Alright, everyone out!” Mike yelled, and he jumped out first, the second the train started going uphill.

Falling out of a train was probably the least fun thing that had happened to Mike that week. Hell, he’d probably rather get kidnapped again over this.

The second he landed on the ground, he managed to roll, and he did his best to roll as far as he could, in case the others were close behind him.

By the time he’d stopped, he did his best to breathe, letting out a small cry. God, everything *hurt* .

He managed to get up, and wandered over to the nearest other person, which turned out to be Max. "Are... are you okay?"

"Fuck." was the reply.

"Okay, you're fine." he said, and he wandered over to Lucas, who was being helped up by El, who seemed oddly fine. "Lucas?"

"I wanna die."

"Where's Dustin?"

Mike heard a groan from farther away.

"Okay, we need to keep- keep moving." Mike said, choking back a sob as he tried to stumble forwards; he *really* hoped that his foot was just sore, because if it was broken, he was going to completely lose his shit. "Those guys could jump out too. Can you all walk?"

Lucas managed to get to his feet, and Max got up behind them; both of them were also pretty close to tears. "I feel like horsehit." Max admitted.

Dustin also managed to get up and wander over, flinching as he did. "My arm hurts." he said.

"El, you okay?" Mike asked.

El nodded.

"Have you jumped out of a train before?" Lucas asked blankly.

She nodded again.

"Of course." Lucas muttered.

"Which way should we go?" Max asked.

"If we follow the tracks, we'll find a town." Dustin said.

"And the Bad Men." Lucas said.

"I say we go over the hill and see if the tracks split." Mike suggested.

“Then we go in whichever direction the train probably didn’t.”

“Can we climb?” Max asked.

“We have to.” Mike said. “We can’t just sleep in the middle of nowhere. Anyone could find us out here.”

They stared at each other, and then Dustin said, “Well, what are we waiting for?”

Unfortunately, they did have to sleep outside.

They passed through a forest area after the hill, doing their best to follow the tracks, not even having enough energy to talk. They were all pretty sore, though, except for El, who ended up moving up ahead of the group, looking for possible threats. And after the trees were gone and they were in a field, they realized the sky had gotten very dark.

“We can’t just sleep.” Mike said. “We’re in the middle of nowhere, we-”

“Mike, we’re *exhausted*.” Max pleaded, gripping onto Lucas’s arm as they stumbled forwards. “Please, let’s just find a somewhat-safe spot and rest for a *bit*.”

Mike eventually gave in, but he offered to keep first watch. They all crashed a little ways from the tracks, and Mike sat in front of everyone, staring ahead, as if waiting for another train to go by.

After a few minutes, El moved forwards to sit beside him. Mike glanced over at her, saying, “The others asleep?”

As she nodded, he said, “I... Well, one good thing about this field is I can see the sky. Look at the stars. I wasn’t able to see them this well in Hawkins.”

El looked a bit confused, but as she followed his gaze, looking up at the sky, her eyes widened. “Stars...” she muttered.

The sky was dark, almost pitch-black. But the stars were out, bright speckles across the dark clouds. A half-moon rose above them, the brightest light at the moment. El looked surprised, as if she'd never actually paid attention to the night sky before. She paused, before saying, "Pretty."

"Yeah. Really pretty." Mike said, looking over at her. As she glanced over, he said, "Did they teach you constellations? In your... training?"

El hesitantly nodded. "On paper. Not outside."

"Well, uh, you can see them now." Mike said. He pointed up. "See there? That's Orion. You can see the belt. And there, there's the Bat."

El nodded, and then pointed. "North Star."

"Yeah!"

She pointed again, a smile spreading across her face. "The Lions."

"And there's the Horseradish! My Mom showed me that one, when we went camping three years ago. And there's the Castle..."

"Castle?" El asked, confused.

Mike paused, his face falling. "Uh, yeah, that's not an official one. Will and I were stargazing one sleepover and thought it looked like his hideout..."

He was silent for a second, and El asked, "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you scared?"

Mike sighed. "How can I not be? Will's still with our *kidnappers*, and he's *alone*. And we're... we're lost, we're being hunted, we... we don't know anything." He turned to El. "Can't you tell us anything? Anything that'll help?"

El looked a bit scared, but she whispered, "I did."

“Wh-what?”

El gestured to his jacket. It took Mike a second to realize what she meant, and then, slowly, he pulled his notebook out. He flipped a few pages, and then stared.

The first page that she'd written was just three letters, over and over and over all across the page.

VFD. VFD. VFD. VFD. VFD.

Mike stared, then looked back up at El. He flipped the page, and then stared at one sentence, written across the top and scratched out slightly.

They'll hate me for leaving, I failed and they'll kill me, I have to run, have to run.

Mike looked back up at her, suddenly panicked. “What do you mean, who's trying to kill you?”

El flinched, gasping and staring back down at the page. Then, quietly, she said, “Papa.”

“Your...”

“And VFD.”

Mike stared at her, and then dropped the notebook, rushing to wrap his arms around her. El jumped, about to move to push him back, but he just gripped her tighter. “I'm *sorry*.” he just said quietly.

El paused, and then hugged Mike back, burying her face in his shoulder. She didn't cry, not yet, but she did let herself drop her guard, just slightly. She relaxed herself, and Mike wondered exactly how long it had been since she had been hugged.

When she finally pulled away, looking back up at the sky, Mike looked back down at the notebook. He flipped the page, staring at what looked like gibberish; probably a code, but he didn't want to translate right now, it was hard to read under the dim light as it was. He flipped a few pages of code, and then stopped. El had written

something uncoded, but he wasn't entirely sure what it was.

He stared, eventually figuring out that it was some kind of song; above each line, she'd written little note symbols, for a rhythm. The lyrics seemed oddly familiar, but he wasn't sure from where. He read it silently at first, feeling dread build up inside him, because this was clearly about some kind of abduction.

And once he got to the final chorus, he started reading aloud, trying his best to process what this meant. El slowly and sadly turned to him as he did.

"And then they took him, yea they took him; They took him far away; They took him in the dead of night; Beneath a moon of gray." He flinched, and continued, even quieter, "They took him from the kitchen; Like you'd take a midnight snack; The VFD they took him; And they never brought him back."

He stared, and El said, very slowly, "I'm not supposed to know that."

"What?"

"The song. But I found it. In a book."

And then, slowly, she turned the page for him. Written there was an extra coda, and Mike paled as he read it.

When we grab you by the ankles,

Where our mark is to be made,

You'll soon be doing noble work,

Although you won't be paid.

When we drive away in secret,

You'll be a volunteer,

So don't scream when we take you:

The world is quiet here.

Mike flipped the page, to find it empty. He looked back at El in horror, and he said, "You'll be a Volunteer?"

El nodded.

"Those are the people who took us? Volunteers?"

She paused before nodding.

And then it suddenly hit him. "And the arsonists?"

El hesitated, before confirming, "Volunteers."

"So we were... were kidnapped by arsonists?" She shook her head and flipped back a few pages, gesturing to a few lines of code. "El, I don't know what that means."

She huffed, and then simply said, "Schism."

Mike paused. "There... was a schism? Between the Volunteers and Arsonists? Wh-what was it about?"

El shut her eyes, and then flipped back to the song.

"El, I don't..."

She shook her head and moved away, lying on the grass. Mike paused, knowing that she was clearly done talking. Slowly, he pocketed the notebook, and then moved to sit closer to her.

"Sorry," he said. "Do you want to talk about anything else?"

She shook her head.

Slowly, Mike laid down next to her, and he said, "I can show you some more stars."

She nodded, and Mike pointed up. “Do you see those?”

Notes for the Chapter:

Me, literally making up constellations because I know nothing about them: what references to the books can I make [HERE](#)?

15. Jonathan hangs out with the Cool Kids

Notes for the Chapter:

hey uuuh does anyone know how to recover deleted tumblr posts because the original gifset I based this fic on... well I just accidentally deleted it and I'd like it back lol

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jonathan hangs out with the Cool Kids

After they started driving, Hopper asked the teens a little bit about themselves. The response he got was, “This is an alliance of convenience and we don’t have to tell you shit.” Jonathan thought that was a bit rude, but he didn’t say anything for the rest of the long, silent drive.

They finally ended up in a hotel, and Lydia and Steve opted for a separate room that Steve managed to pay for himself. However, they all met in Joyce’s room before going to bed.

“So, I want you to tell us again where the kids are.” Joyce said.

“All the kids except, apparently, one, were running around Sherwood with one of our runaway apprentices.” Lydia said. “The other’s probably still in the custody of a chaperone.”

Hopper said, “So, then, how are you going to help us?”

“Well first, asshole, we can get you to Headquarters to find out where your apprentice is.” Lydia rolled her eyes. “And second, if the Other Side knows where the others are, they’ll have the information there, too. And if they don’t, we have friends who are also currently tracking them.”

“And what do you get out of this?” the officer asked.

“First, we don’t have to sit through another fucking lecture from our superiors.” Steve said. “And that’s always a bonus. Second, we’d like to find these apprentices before our friends do.”

“Why?” Jonathan asked cautiously. “Are you trying to leave?”

“Fuck no, we have important shit to do.” Nancy said. “But our runaway is a friend of a friend and we’d like to make sure she’s okay.”

They didn’t tell them much after that, and they eventually wandered over to their own rooms, with Hopper leaving soon after. And after Joyce fell asleep, Jonathan paused, and then pocketed a certain item, snuck out of the room, and went and knocked on the other teenagers’ door.

Just when he decided this was probably a mistake, the door opened, and Lydia looked up at him.

He froze for a second, staring, and she said, “What do you want, Byers boy?”

“Uh, uh... J-Jonathan, and I... I just wanted to... where’s Steve?”

“Went to survey the building, in case we need a quick getaway.” Lydia shrugged. “You need anything?”

Jonathan paused, and then pulled out the half-telescope out of his pocket.

Lydia stared at it, and then said, “Come on in.”

Jonathan entered the room, and the girl closed the door, grabbing the telescope from him. “Where’d you get this?”

“It- it was in my Mom’s stuff.”

“Makes sense.” Lydia said, flipping it over. “I figured she had some Volunteer connections. Although how this got split in half is anyone’s guess.”

“Volunteer?”

Lydia glanced over at Jonathan. "How much do you know about VFD?"

"VF-" It took Jonathan a second to get it. "Oh, oh, the- the thing you're all in."

She rolled her eyes, but nodded.

"Uh, well, um, you guys get your recruits via kidnapping-"

"True."

"-and you're kinda spies? Who study a lot of things."

"Half-true."

"How's it half-true?"

Lydia paused. "Some time before I was born, there was a... a schism. VFD split, because the fuckers who thought they were better than us wanted us to stop setting shit on fire."

"That doesn't sound too bad."

"Oh, they set shit on fire too, they just pretended they don't."

"Uh..."

Lydia moved closer towards him, and then she said, "You have the other half of the spyglass?"

"Uh, no."

"Hmm, okay. I got one." she tossed him the item back, and pulled a full spyglass from her pocket. As he watched, she snapped it in half. And then, in a second, she put it back together.

"It's designed to burn only half during a fire." she explained as she clicked it. "So personalized spyglasses don't get intercepted." Jonathan stared, and then she continued, "How involved with Volunteering is your Mother?"

"I shouldn't..."

"I assume she hasn't told you much."

"I... I only found out this was a *thing* after Will was kidnapped."

"Yeah, your... your brother..." Lydia said, thinking to herself. Then, she said, "Let's make a deal, Byers."

"Uh, my name's Jonathan."

"And my name's not Lydia." she said. "But here's the deal. I tell you anything you want to know about our society- you already know it exists, might as well know some useful shit- and you give me information on the kids."

"Wha- why?"

"Let's just say I'm interested in the children I need to save." Lydia said. "And I won't tell my side about them, if that's what you're worried about."

Jonathan paused, and then said, "We'll... we'll see how it goes."

"Sounds good enough." Lydia said. "For starters, I wanna know why the Volunteers wanted these kids. What can they do?"

"Do? I don't... they're *kids* , it's not like they're superpowered or anything." Jonathan said.

"Every member has a specialized interest, something that makes them valuable." Lydia shrugged. "I'm proficient in almost all weapons. Steve's got much better agility than most people. What can the kids do?"

"I don't..." Jonathan considered. "Uh, Will's an artist. Likes to draw. And... and Max has her skateboard? I don't know... Lucas and Dustin are really good at science, I guess. Mike writes stuff."

"Writes?"

"Yeah, he's in charge of their games or whatever." Jonathan wondered if he should be spilling all of this; it felt *wrong* , as if she was going to turn around and use this information against him. But,

well, why would she? His Mom said she had joined them cause she was trying to get a kid out, too.

“Was, uh, was Mike the one with black hair?” she asked. As Jonathan stared at her, she said, “I told you, I ran into a couple in town. They ran, though, so I don’t know where they are now.”

After a hesitant second, Jonathan asked, “Did you see Will? Is he okay?”

“Uh, he was... was the one who wasn’t with them. Probably still captured.”

Jonathan’s face fell, and Lydia said, “Sorry, sorry, it’s just... but Mike was the one with black hair? Yeah, he seemed to be the protector. Is he... always like that?”

“I think I should go.” Jonathan said.

“Hey! Wait!” Nancy reached forwards, stopping him from getting up. “Look, I just wanna know some shit. How much do they know about-”

“I don’t *know* ! I don’t know *anything* , and that’s the problem!” Jonathan said, shaking her off and standing up. “Nobody told me anything about this until Will disappeared and now he’s stuck *alone* with some fucking cult and the other kids are *God* knows where, and *then* my Mom drags back two arsonists to join us who don’t care to tell us shit!”

Lydia paused, and he turned to go. He’d reached the door, and had his hand on the handle, before she spoke.

“I was six.”

He froze.

“I heard a noise outside my window.” she continued, her voice low. “Mom said it was nothing. Then I was dragged out by my ankle and shoved into a car. And... I don’t remember what my Mom looks like anymore. Or my Dad. Barely remember my... my brother. But I remember the fear. I remember crying and screaming and being

tossed from place to place and... maybe you have it better off.” she sighed, and said, “Maybe not knowing anything would be better than knowing it all. But I don’t know. I don’t know what you know and what you don’t and I just want to help these fucking kids. So, please... just tell me anything.”

Jonathan stood at the doorway for a while, and then, slowly, he turned.

“Will... Will likes music.” he said quietly. “Loud music. You wouldn’t know it by looking at him, but he likes it. He plays it when no one else is around so he can dance. He doesn’t know I’ve seen him, but sometimes he leaves the door open and I can see him. And he’s really shy around people, doesn’t really get how to talk to them. He has his friends and that’s enough for him. And he loves to read, and when he draws he could create an entire world. And he... he’s got a smile that could light up the planet, you know? And I’m always terrified that I’m gonna fuck up and he’s gonna get hurt, but... but he’s a lot braver than you’d think. He’s so brave, and... and I’m scared for him, yeah, but he’s so strong. He wouldn’t want me to be worried about him, I know. He hates when people worry about him.” He trailed off, as Lydia just stared at him. Finally he said, “Is that not what you wanted?”

“No, it’s just...” she paused. “Nothing. Look, Steve’ll be back soon, maybe I’ll talk to you next time we stop? I can show you some codes.”

Jonathan nodded slowly. “Yeah, I’d... like that.”

After he left, Nancy flopped down onto the bed, staring at the spyglass in her hands.

She had fully expected Jonathan to list all the kids’ attributes, she wasn’t going to lie. She figured he’d just tell her about what they could do, how well they could do it, maybe even if they’d shown destructive tendencies that would make them a target for the Firestarters. That’s what she’d always heard when adults discussed kids or apprentices. That’s what everyone always talked about first.

But he didn't *know* those. He didn't know how strong they were, why their organization would want them, what exactly they could do. But he knew the little things. The things that his brother liked, the way he smiled, how *emotionally* strong he was.

Is that how normal people talked about each other?

When Steve walked in, saying something about how he found most of the available exits, Nancy remained silent for a while. Then, after a second, she said, "Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you... do you think they're right? Kali, and Byers?" she paused. "Are we in a cult?"

"No, no." Steve said. "We're... we're different."

"How?"

"Well, we... we do things for... I don't know, we just are."

That wasn't exactly a comforting response, and both of them knew it.

16. The Party catches up on the Wild Shit that's been happening

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Party catches up on the Wild Shit that's been happening

When Max woke up, Mike and El had fallen asleep next to each other. She was a bit concerned that they'd apparently forgotten to wake up another guard, but at least Mike hadn't freaked out and woken them up because he wanted to keep walking until their feet fell off. So she sat up for a bit, watching the sky brighten, and then she shook Lucas and Dustin awake. "We should go," she said, before moving over to Mike and El. They were all still very sore from the day before, but they could probably get a few miles in before crashing again.

They followed the tracks some more, and Max kept glancing back at Mike and El, who were giving each other glances as Mike nervously fiddled with something in his jacket pocket. Max moved closer to Lucas, and muttered, "You doing okay?"

"We jumped off a train yesterday." Lucas simply said.

"Yeah. Always wanted to do that, but it hurt more than I thought." Max paused. "Although, I probably could've just knocked out the conductor and taken over the train."

"Yeah, I feel like stealing a train would be a bad idea."

"I don't."

"We're not letting you steal a train."

Max paused as Dustin moved to catch up to them, and then she asked, "Are you doing okay?"

"Arm still hurts, I think I landed on it wrong," he said. "But otherwise

I'm alright. You guys?"

"Mostly." Lucas shrugged.

Dustin glanced back towards El and Mike, and he said, "Hey, do you think they're acting weird?"

"El's always weird." Lucas said.

"What do you think El's short for?" Max asked.

"Let me think..." Lucas said. "You had a lot of names earlier."

"Yeah, well, name meanings were a special interest of mine a few years ago."

"I think I remember that." Dustin said. "You told me that mine meant 'warrior.'"

"Yeah, and mine means 'the greatest.'" Max snorted. "Which I am."

Besides them, a bird whistled in the trees. And behind them, El stiffened and whistled back, imitating the sound. They paused, watching as the bird flew out from the branch, flying over their heads. El relaxed then, and Lucas said, "You can do birdcalls too?"

"For codes."

"Alright, whatever."

Before they could start moving again, Mike said, "Guys, uh... Uh, I wanna talk about the people who grabbed us."

"What about them?" Dustin asked.

"They, uh..." Mike stumbled, reaching into his pocket to pull out his notebook, flipping through. "You see, um..."

He paused, and then turned the notebook around, showing them a page littered with the letters *VFD* over and over and over.

"VFD?" Max asked, as they came closer, and El jumped back. "What's that?"

"It's, uh..." Mike said, and then he flipped back, showing a few doodles of El's tattoo.

"What's..." Lucas said, and then Dustin leaned forwards, tracing the shape of the eye- which indeed, formed the letters.

"Why've you got a VFD tattooed on you?" Max asked, turning towards El, who was very intently staring at the tracks.

"It stands for something." Mike said.

"Like what?" Lucas asked.

"I don't know!" Mike said. "She didn't say-"

"She never says anything!"

"I think she said some more stuff, but..." Mike flipped forwards, showing them a page of gibberish. "It's all in code."

"Why couldn't she write normally?" Dustin asked, glancing at El. "Why didn't you write-"

Looking panicked, El backed up a bit, shaking her head.

"She's... she did say something else."

Mike flipped a few pages, ahead, showing what looked like a hastily-written song.

"The fuck is this?" Dustin muttered.

"Hold on, I think I know this." Max said, scanning the words.

"What?" Lucas and Mike both said.

"Yeah. This is an old folk song." Max said. "My Dad used to sing it when I was a kid. I mean, I don't remember much of it, but... yeah, I remember that, 'Robber Road.'"

"You do?"

Max paused, and then, scanning the lyrics, she started to sing, a tune

she thought she might remember. *“On a charming little cattle farm,
Near a pretty deadly lake...”*

She sang through the first verse, and when she got to the Chorus, she jumped, surprised, to hear El join in the song.

El didn't have a perfect singing voice, but it was undeniably pretty, and it was pretty clear pretty fast that she'd had the song memorized for a while.

*“And then they took him, yea they took him; They took him far away;
They took him in the dead of night; Beneath a moon of gray.”*

*“They took him from the kitchen; Like you'd take a midnight snack; The
VFD they took him...”*

Max trailed off, eyes wide. El, however, kept singing.

“And they never brought him back.”

The kids all stared at El, who simply looked back at them. Finally, Lucas said, “The VFD took us, didn't they?”

“They took her, too.” Mike said. “The Arsonists are, like, a subset of VFD that the others don't like, I think.”

“So, what do we do about this?” Dustin asked. “Why's this important?”

“Well, now we know more about them.” Mike said quietly. “We know enough to tell the cops some stuff, we know a bit more of what's going on, and I think that's... I think that we should know as much as possible, cause then we could figure out why they... why they took us.”

After a pause, Lucas said, “Okay. Okay, let's get into town, and... see if we can find another way home.”

And after another silent moment, they started walking again.

Several minutes, later, El continued singing the song, and none of them felt brave enough to stop her.

“He was lively, an intelligent; And drank a lot of milk; His crib was made of silver; And his diapers sewn from silk.”

“Both his siblings watched him; And his mother, and his dad; But someone else was watching o’er the Little Snicket Lad.”

They listened to the chorus again in silence, though they were a bit confused when she used an alternate latter half. She continued with verse three, which was, well, *not* helping their nerves.

“They came in through the windows; Not the door, which was the fad; A long black car was parked outside; For the little Snicket lad. ”

“El...?” Mike whispered, but she didn’t hear him, as she was continuing onto the Chorus again.

And when she finished the Chorus, she sung the coda.

And if the children weren’t all feeling a lot of dread before, they were now.

“So don’t scream when we take you; The world is quiet here.”

And then there was a deathly silence for the rest of the walk.

When they saw a town, they all moved a bit closer to each other, grabbing hands and trying to keep their heads low. They know that they all looked filthy and tired, and eventually someone would notice.

“What’s the plan?” Dustin asked.

“We should find some food.” Lucas said. “Whether we steal it or use some of our change, we don’t know when we’ll eat next, so we should get some fast. Then we should try and find a bus; I’d rather not take another train.”

“Ditto.” Max said.

El *hmm*ed but didn’t say anything more.

The town wasn't very full of people, and the children weren't sure if that was good or bad; there were less people who could spot them, and less of a chance they would be separated in a large crowd, but the emptiness of the streets meant they were more noticeable. They mostly kept the shadows, but even then got a few odd stares. They passed one man who asked them, "Shouldn't you be in School?" and they'd all frozen in panic until Dustin just told him they were specially educated and the man nodded and let them leave.

After a second, though, Max paused at a sign in the store. "Is that the town name?" she asked, pointing ahead.

"Think so." Mike replied. "Why?"

Max didn't respond, her face blank as several emotions rose in her at once. "Um... well... I think... I think I may know somebody here..."

"What?" Dustin asked.

"Are you sure?" Lucas added.

"Who is it?" Mike asked.

Max paused, biting her lip. "My... Billy goes to school here."

Max could see everyone's reactions mirroring hers. *Well, fuck.*

"Do you think he could give us a ride back?" Dustin finally asked, quietly.

"I don't think so, he's kinda a jerk." Max said.

"But we got *kidnapped* , surely he'd understand, right?"

Max bit her lip, and Lucas and Mike both flinched. El just narrowed her eyes. "Billy?"

"My stepbrother."

El seemed to remember what Max had told her about him, because she just crossed her arms and said, "Bad man?"

Before Max could respond, Mike said, “Max, I know he’s... he’s a dick, but he might be a good escape route. He’s got a car, right? So he can drive us home.”

“He wouldn’t go out of his way just for us.” Max said.

“He could at least get us some food, or a change of clothes.” Dustin suggested.

“He literally couldn’t give two shits about me.” Max said. “He only cares about not pissing off his Dad.”

“Well, I mean, it would probably piss off his Dad if he didn’t help you get home.” Lucas suggested warily.

“He won’t help us; if anything, he’ll make things worse by dropping us off with the cops.” Max said.

Mike turned to El. “Are you *absolutely sure* we can’t go to the police?”

El nodded quickly.

“And you’re *sure* that the... what is it- VFD?” Dustin asked. “They’re with the cops?”

Another nod.

“How do you know this?” Lucas asked, a little cautiously.

El stared at the ground, for a very long time, before she whispered. “Sister.”

“What?” Mike asked, as everyone jumped.

“Sister... tried to run.” El said, flinching as if this was a horrible crime. “They brought her back.”

“That... *shit* .” Max muttered.

“You have a sister?” Dustin asked quietly.

El froze up again, and after a second, Mike said, “Uh, guys, let’s... let’s keep moving. We need to find food.”

Max glanced towards a store, and said, "How about two of us go in there, steal or buy something- I'd suggest steal, we might need that money for a ride home- and then we keep going?"

"Who's going in?" Mike asked.

"I'll go." Dustin volunteered.

"And I'll go, too." Max said.

Mike and Lucas both hesitated, glancing at each other, before nodding slightly. "Be careful," Mike said, "And stay safe."

After they left, El, Mike and Lucas moved to sit between two buildings. Lucas tried asking about El's sister again, but she just shook her head and bit her lip, and Mike glared at Lucas until he said, "Mike, can we talk?"

Slowly, Mike and Lucas wandered away from El- not too far, but far enough that they could have a quiet conversation.

"Why are you defending her?" Lucas asked.

"Defending her?" Mike asked.

"She was with *them*, and she could know things, and she *won't tell us*."

Mike paused, glancing towards El, who was playing with the hem of her shirt again. He quietly said, "She's *scared*, Lucas."

"What does she have to be sca-"

Mike pulled his notebook out of his pocket, flipping forwards, and then he passed it to Lucas. Lucas glanced down, and then his face fell. After a second, he said, very, very quietly, "She thinks they're gonna kill her?"

"Yeah. Look, I don't know what happened to her sister- I didn't know she had one until, like, now- but it must've been bad. Her whole *life*

must've been bad; from what I can tell, she thinks if she talks about it directly she thinks something bad'll happen. She's definitely been hurt, and if we push her it's not going to help."

Lucas paused, glancing towards El, and he just said, "It's just... frustrating. She knows *everything* and-"

"I know, I think she wants to tell us, but we can't force her." Mike said.

"Fuck, I've..." Lucas said. "I didn't think of... *shit*."

"Lucas, it's-"

"I'm just... *scared*." Lucas admitted, and Mike froze. "Mike, we're lost and hunted and Will's... who *knows* what they're doing to him?"

"Lucas..."

"We should've gone back for him." Lucas said, his voice rising slightly and tears coming to his eyes. "We should've gone back for Will, why did we *leave*, he's still there and we just ran and we should've just turned right around as soon as we were safe."

"Lucas-"

"Will's *gone* and it's our fault!"

Mike jumped forwards to hug Lucas, surprising him; but within a second, Lucas was hugging him back, still trying not to cry.

"It's gonna be okay." Mike said quietly. "Will'll come back, and the adults will find him and take care of those assholes who took him, and everything will be okay again."

"How do you know?" Lucas asked.

Mike didn't answer.

Slowly, Lucas pulled away, and he said, "But... we *can* do something. Give me your pencil."

“Why?”

Lucas flipped the page, staring down at the gibberish that made up some kind of code. “I’m gonna figure out what she’s trying to say.”

17. The Party picks probably the Worst Place to Hide

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Party picks probably the Worst Place to Hide

“How much do we still have left?” Max asked.

“Shit, I didn’t get our money from Lucas.” Dustin said. “I’ve just got some extra change, not much.”

“Stealing it is, then.” she whispered.

They’d just entered the store, and as Max glanced around, looking for food, she noticed that there weren’t many people. That was good, she guessed. They could probably swipe something while nobody was looking. Probably just snack bags, maybe a muffin out for display. It wouldn’t last them long, but it would be something.

“Should we get some medicine?” Dustin whispered as they passed by the front desk; the cashier was busy reading and clearly didn’t care much about them.

“Probably not,” Max said hesitantly, “But some bandages wouldn’t be a bad idea. Also, should probably buy something so we don’t look too suspicious.”

“You seem to know a lot about this.” Dustin said.

“Just... wondered if I should run away every now and again.” Max shrugged. “Find my Dad, you know?”

“Why didn’t you?”

Max paused. “I’d have to leave...” *you guys.* “Things I like in Hawkins.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

They moved down the aisles in silence, then, scanning for something they might be able to grab. Max tended to keep watch while Dustin eventually started throwing bags of food into his pockets.

After a second, Dustin said, "I feel *really* bad about this."

"We don't have a fucking option." Max muttered. As she saw Dustin's guilty expression, she softened a bit and said, "Listen, when... when this all blows over, we'll come back and give them some money. Pay for it all later."

Dustin bit his lip, still not very comfortable but allowing himself to play along for now. Max recognized that look very quickly. She used it a lot.

She was so focused on Dustin at the moment that she didn't hear the store door open, and someone else walk in.

They wandered into another aisle, and Max managed to toss Dustin a package of bandages. After a second, and a pause, Max reached forwards and grabbed a box of pads, too.

"I can't fit that in my jacket."

"We don't know how long we'll be out." Max said. "And if El or I start while we're on the run--"

"Still can't fit that in my jacket."

"We'll pay for this."

"Definitely don't have enough money."

"Gimme what you have and then we'll get the rest from Lucas. Hell, you can dump our food with him, too. Minimize chances of getting caught." Max checked the price, and then showed Dustin. "With what we got..."

"I can do math. Here's our change, I'll go get more. Will you... be okay alone?" Dustin asked cautiously.

"I'll be fine. The store's basically empty." Max said.

“I still don’t know...”

“Look, if someone tries to grab me, I’ll bite them, scream, and then beat the shit outta them.” Max said. “You’ll hear me. Go get some cash.”

Dustin nodded, and then rushed out, wanting to get back as quickly as possible.

Max wandered up to the front counter, sliding the box across. “I, uh, I’m waiting for my friend with the money.”

The cashier glanced at her oddly, and Max was suddenly acutely aware that she looked very dirty. “Where are your parents, sweetie?”

Max paused. “Uh... uh, they’re in the... outside.”

Shit.

The cashier narrowed their eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Buying pads.”

“In *town*. I don’t think I’ve seen you before.”

“I...” Max paused. “We’re v-visiting my... my brother.”

“And where is he?”

Max paused, and unfortunately, that’s when she felt a firm, cold hand on her shoulder.

“Sorry,” said an all-too familiar voice, “Right here. Forgot something outside.”

Max completely froze over.

“What do you mean?” Lucas shouted. “You left her there *alone*?”

“Keep your voice down!” Mike said quickly.

Dustin flinched back, glancing at El, who also looked startled. "Look, we just need some extra cash, and then I'm going back in. Nothing'll happen if we hurry."

Lucas reached into his pocket and shoved a fistful of cash in Dustin's hands. "Is this eno-" Dustin began.

"Just go get her!" Lucas said, almost pushing Dustin away.

"Alright, geez." Dustin said, pocketing the cash and starting to run towards the building.

"Calm down, Lucas, they just needed extra cash-" Mike said.

"None of us should be alone." Lucas replied, flipping back to his place in Mike's notebook. "None of us. Splitting up is how Will got... who knows what could happen to her."

"Max can take care of-"

"She can fight better than the rest of us, but those guys got her instantly."

"They surprised her."

"Yeah, and they could do it again!"

"Stop it." El muttered, curling up slightly and glaring daggers at the wall.

"Listen, when they get back, we just need to get-" Mike began.

At that moment, they looked up in terror as Dustin rushed out of the store, noticeably alone.

Lucas dropped the notebook, and as Mike picked it up, he ran towards Dustin, meeting him in the street.

"Where's Max?"

"I don't..." Dustin struggled to catch his breath. "I got up to the counter, the woman said that Max... that Max left with her... her

brother-”

Lucas stared in horror for a split second, and then said, “How’d they get out?”

“I don’t-”

“There must be a back door.” Mike said, as he and El caught up to the others.

Without even stopping to think, Lucas took off towards the back of the store.

“Shit!” Dustin said, as the rest of them followed.

Surprisingly- or perhaps not surprisingly, considering she seemed to be great at everything else- El managed to outpace everyone, even Lucas.

And by the time she got to the back of the building, they heard her screech.

Billy paid for the pads and a pack of cigarettes, and pressed the box into Max’s hands as he steered her out the back. Max’s heart was pounding in her chest, and no matter how much she thought *I need to get out I need to get out I need to get out*, she couldn’t do more than follow.

Once they were out of the building, Billy said, “Alright, you little shit, what are you doing here?”

“I... I got lost.” Max said.

“You got lost several hundred miles away from Hawkins?”

Several hundred.

“I... I...” Max took a deep breath. “Look, some shit happened, and I need to get home. If you could... could just tell me where to find a bus or a train or something, you won’t have to see me again.”

Billy glared at her, and it took everything in Max's power not to shrink back, to stare back at him with a spark of defiance, to let him know that she wasn't scared, even though she was, she *really* was, and his grip on her shoulder wasn't loosening.

"Who are you with?"

She felt herself grow colder. "What?"

"You said someone was bringing money. Who are you with?"

He can't know I have friends, he hates when I have friends, he can't know...

"Nobody. I made that up. Wanted them to look the other way so I could steal the box."

"You know something, Max?" Billy said darkly. "I don't believe you."

"Billy, please." Max said.

"Do you know why you're in this town?"

"Of course I do, I just want to go home."

"I don't think you do."

Suddenly, a realization dawned on Max.

The special school. The cigarettes. The fact Neil finally let him out of his sight.

Do you know why you're here?

No, no, no, no, no, *no*, she had to be wrong, she had to be...

Suddenly, she heard a screech behind her.

She whipped around, panic filling her as she saw El behind them. Suddenly, Billy's grip on her tightened, as El backed up, eyes wide. "Bad man!" she screamed.

Lucas burst around the corner, looking just as panicked as Max, and

just the sight of him increased Max's fear even more. "Let her go!" he said quickly.

No, no, no, just run, Lucas, just go.

Mike and Dustin ran in, too, and Billy said, "Is that 'nobody', Max?"

"Leave her alone!" Mike nearly yelled, glancing around the street for some kind of weapon.

"What were you doing with them?" Billy asked, as Max started clenching her fists, trying to get herself to *move*.

Mike picked a piece of wood off of the ground, looking ready to charge, while Lucas and Dustin started looking like they were prepared to run at Billy with just their fists. El had shrunk behind them, a wild look in her eyes, and Max realized that Billy was staring right at her.

"What are you doing with that Phoenix kid?"

"The what?" Mike asked, lowering the wood slightly in shock.

Max met eyes with Lucas, and saw a flash of terror hidden behind his fury.

And, very quietly, Max said, "Get away from them."

"What was that?"

All of Max's fury burst to the surface, as she screamed, "Get *away!*" and kicked Billy's leg, whipping herself around to try and break his hold. While the grip loosened, she wasn't completely released; fortunately, at that moment, El burst past Mike and Lucas, screaming and grabbing Billy's arm, pushing it back. As he shouted and broke his grip on Max, she grabbed El's hand and the two of them rushed towards the boys. Max grabbed the wood from Mike, saying, "Go, go, go!"

Startled, the kids started to run, with Max bringing up the rear, glancing behind her on occasion to see if Billy was chasing them. As they turned the bend, she thought she saw him following, but she

took off at a run and didn't look back.

The kids ran for a very long time. When they came to their first crossroads, Max tossed the wooden board in the direction they hadn't followed, hoping that might throw off her stepbrother.

At some point, when they entered a slightly more populated part of the town, Dustin gestured towards the doors of a Library, and they all rushed inside, running to the emptiest room before sitting on the ground and staring at each other.

Max glanced around, seeing the piles of books surrounding them. This seemed to be the kids' section, but nobody was around currently; it might still be school hours, she had no idea. She glanced down at her hands, very surprised to see that she'd managed to keep hold of the box of pads.

Next to her, she noticed, El started to look very uncomfortable, glancing at the books as if they might jump up and attack her. Max slowly slid a hand over hers, not entirely sure what was bothering her but not wanting her to be so scared.

"Are you okay?" Lucas asked, looking at Max with worry.

She nodded slowly.

Finally, Dustin said, "What the *fuck* just happened?"

"You shouldn't have left her alone!" Lucas said, a little too loudly.

"It's my fault, I told him to go." Max said quickly.

Lucas turned to glare at her. "None of us should be alone!"

"Well, excuse me for needing *money*!"

"Don't fight!" Mike said, scooting forwards so he was inbetween them. "Don't fight, that won't do us any good. Max, did Billy... did he hurt you?"

Max flinched. “Not... no. Just gave me a good scare.”

“So, uh...” Dustin said, sounding guilty, “I guess he won’t help us.”

“No, he... I think he...” Max bit her lip. “I think he’s with them.”

“What?” The boys asked, eyes wide.

“He...” Max started to explain, but El interrupted her.

“Bad Man.” El said, nodding, and moving closer to the others and farther from the books.

They stared for a second, and Mike said, “Have you... seen him before?”

El paused, before saying, “Passed by.”

“You passed by him?”

Before El could answer, two kids rushed down a nearby aisle, laughing as their mother called for them and startling the kids. One of the children hit a shelf, sending a few books flying to the ground. While they rushed away, El let out a small whimper and grabbed onto Max’s arm.

“We need to get somewhere safer. Quieter.” Mike said.

“I...” Max paused. “When I was with my Dad, he was friends with this Librarian, and she showed me, like, a secret room the librarians had upstairs where they took their breaks. I bet we could find it and break in, y’know?”

“Other Librarians would find us.” Mike said.

“What about the back room?” Dustin asked. “The one they use for storage? The Librarian in Hawkins told me they rarely go back there.”

“That doesn’t sound right.” Max said.

“It’s a better shot than the break room.” Lucas said. “And might be

easier to hide in.”

“Alright, let’s try it.” Mike said. “Come on guys, let’s... find the storage room, I guess.”

18. Nancy and Jonathan spill Secrets

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Nancy and Jonathan spill Secrets

When they stopped at the next hotel, Lydia explained the directions they were to head for tomorrow, Hopper called into his police station to inform them he was still working on a lead, and after everyone was asleep, Jonathan snuck over to the other teens' room.

"Okay, so, the spyglass is used for visual codes." Steve explained, holding it out in front of him to show Jonathan; apparently he was better at it than Lydia was. "You see these numbers on the sides? Those are the settings."

"Settings?"

"So it knows which code to translate. The Other Side's inventors made it a little before the schism, right before things went sour, because they didn't have the time to teach their apprentices all the codes they might need."

"I call it lazy." Lydia sighed, glancing up from her bed, where she was flipping a match in her hands. "But if the Other Fuckers get to have these, we should, too."

"Usually if the codes come in film, they'll be through subtitles." Steve explained. "And the number at the beginning should be the setting. Unfortunately it won't work for you since you only have half, but if you can find another half you're good to go."

Jonathan nodded, flipping his half-spyglass in his hands. "I don't know why Mom's only got half."

"If I had a guess? Some kind of fire." Steve said. "They're designed to half-burn in case of fire, so that we don't steal their secrets or whatever."

“Do you remember any fires? From when you were a kid?” Lydia asked.

Jonathan shook his head.

“Could’ve happened while she was on a mission or something.” Lydia said. “She ever leave you home alone?”

“Uh, you mean before she left?” Jonathan asked. “Uh, no. No, she was at home all the time.”

“Are you sure?”

Jonathan flinched. “Yeah. My, uh, Dad was a dick and didn’t like us leaving the house, from what I remember.”

“Hmm, that’s fucked.” Lydia shrugged, sitting up. “Hey, tell him about the vigenere cipher, Steve.”

“*Fuck* no, that shit is hard.”

“My Mom mentioned that.” Jonathan perked up slightly. “What is it?”

Lydia sighed, turning towards him. “Okay, so, Vigenere is a polyalphabetic substitution cipher. You use a keyword and a table, and have letters replace each other.”

Jonathan paused. “What?”

“Yeah, it’s one of the more-” Lydia sighed. “Well, it’s not used often, anyway. When did your Mom mention it?”

“She, uh, wrote one down on a piece of paper, and translated for us.”

“She wrote down a table from memory?”

“No, uh, the code. It was the opening to *Little Women* , apparently, but it just looked like gibberish to me.”

Lydia and Steve both glanced at each other, looking slightly impressed. “Well, if she can do it in her *head* , she had to be a

codebreaker, right?”

“Uh, I think she did mention she was... in a lot of coding classes.” Jonathan said awkwardly. After a second, he said, “Look, maybe I shouldn’t-”

“We’re not gonna tell anyone.” Steve said. “Your Mom doesn’t plan on spilling our organization’s secrets, does she?”

“She’s kept her mouth shut for a little over a decade.” Lydia mentioned.

“Then she’s not our problem.” Steve said. “So long as she keeps quiet, we’ll be fine.”

“Why don’t...” Jonathan hesitated. “Why can’t you tell people?”

“Chaos.” Lydia sighed. “We’ve been keeping the world’s secrets for centuries. If they found out about us... about what we’ve done... well, neither side would make it out unscathed. The threat of a reveal is the one tactic we can’t really use on each other.”

“Which is why they won’t let you leave?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say they ‘won’t let’ us leave-” Steve began.

“Do you know anyone who’s left?” Jonathan asked.

“Well...” Lydia said after a second, “I’m sure their identities would be hidden. For their safety.”

Jonathan stared at them, and after a second, Lydia quickly changed the subject. “So, uh, what about the kids? What are... they like?”

“Um...” Jonathan hesitated. Should he really tell them? Well, they seemed interested, and if they were going to help, he might as well help them get to know who they were saving. And it was easier to talk about people he knew than to talk about himself, or things he didn’t know. “Well, uh, I told you about Will, so... Dustin’s really energetic, he’s always trying to talk to everyone. Really curious about everything, if you gave him any book on any subject he’d pour through it. He always likes to make people feel at home, I guess. He

and Lucas were always the first ones to try and make new friends.”

“Which one was Lucas?” Steve asked, while Lydia just looked slightly impatient.

“Uh, he’s really brave, incredibly loyal. Once he’s decided on a friend, he’ll stick with them forever. One time, some kids were picking on Will and Mike, and Lucas punched them both in the face. I was babysitting them and I had to drive them home, they thought it was way cooler than anything else that’d happened that day. Lucas thought it wasn’t much, though, because he just figured anyone would’ve done that. I don’t know if he can comprehend the idea of... of not defending his friends.”

“And, um, Max is really new. She only moved in a few years ago, I don’t know her much because she mostly just hangs out with them at school or the arcade, but she shows up sometimes. She seems like she’s really tough, but she’s probably one of the sweetest kids I’ve ever met. Always cares about how everyone’s feeling and what they think. She’s really brave, though, and I can tell she really likes having her friends around.”

“What about... about the other one?” Nancy asked quietly. “Mike?”

“He’s... he’s a really nice kid.” Jonathan said. “He leads all their games, really imaginative. He’s got a heart of gold, too, loves helping people and always tries to be nice. He and Will trade books all the time, sometimes he’ll even write his friends stuff for them to read, and he’s... I *think* he’s kind of the leader of the group, but I’m not really sure. They mostly just work together, try to...”

There was a bit of a silence, before Steve said, “What?”

“Nothing, it’s just... just hit me again.” Jonathan said, staring at the ground. “Those kids... they’re all out there *alone*. And they’re being hunted, if they haven’t been caught already, and...”

“Are you...” Lydia paused, watching him carefully.

“Fine. I’m...” Jonathan paused. “Just... let’s go over some codes, yeah?”

Lydia looked slightly disappointed, but Steve said quickly, "Yeah. Let's do that. So, what do you know about Sebald?"

The next morning, while Lydia was repeating directions again, Jonathan waited a little farther away from the group, leaning against the car and staring at nothing.

After a second, Joyce came over, glancing back at the teens and Hopper, and she said, "Hey, are you alright?"

"Just... scared, you know?" Jonathan said.

Joyce paused, and then she said, "Do you want me to... find someplace for you to hide out? I know this can be-"

"No, no, I want to find Will." Jonathan said. "It's just..." he hesitated, looking at the teens, watching Lydia toss her ponytail over her shoulder and smirk, and he said, "Do you think we can trust them?"

"Of course not." Joyce said sharply. "You can't trust any of them. But they're the best shot we have. Firestarters mostly work for themselves and themselves alone. And it seems to be in their best interest to follow us. The second it's not, though, we'll have to have an escape route."

"Escape route?"

Joyce sighed. "I don't like thinking like that. That's how *they* all think, and these two are just kids. But... unfortunately, they're definitely arsonists. If we pose a threat... well, anyway, I'd like to help them if we can, but if we can't, we have to be prepared."

Jonathan nodded slowly, and then he said, "I think they do care about the kids, though. For whatever reason, they wanna make sure they're safe."

"That's good." Joyce said quietly. And then, she said, "Jonathan, I... we're gonna find Will. Just remember, we're going to find him and the other kids and they're going to be okay. I'm not letting those horrible people take them away from us."

“I know.” Jonathan said. “I know.”

He didn't know. He really didn't. He was so, so scared that Will would disappear, that they wouldn't find him again, that he'd been taken out of the country or hidden somewhere remote and they'd never reach him again.

But he had to hope, because goddamnit if he wasn't going to try and save his brother.

19. Dustin and Lucas spend their Vacation at the Library

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Dustin and Lucas spend their Vacation at the Library

They managed to get into the storage room, and after a second, Mike noticed that El looked more and more nervous. “Are you okay?” he asked.

After El hesitantly nodded, Max said, “You... you said you’d passed by Billy. What did you mean by that?”

El whispered, “We... stopped by a place. To get papers. He was training. With the others.”

“How many... how many kids do these people have?” Lucas asked.

El didn’t answer, instead curling up a bit.

“If...” Max paused, a dark fear behind her eyes. “If they got Billy, too... how... how long have they known about *me* ? Did... did they *plan* this? Did they know about *me*, did they follow me, is this *my* fault-?”

“No! No, it’s not your fault!” Lucas said quickly, moving forwards and grabbing Max’s hands. “Even if they followed you, you didn’t know, it’s *their* fault for trying to kidnap us, okay? It’s not you-”

“It’s definitely not.” Mike said, causing everyone to turn towards him in surprise. “I... I don’t think it’s you they were following. I... I think it was me.”

“What are you talking about?” Lucas asked.

“What do you *think*?” Mike said, glaring up at them. “What do you fucking think? My sister just so happened to disappear out her own window when I was a kid, and guess what happens on the night I’m

left alone? The night we go into her room and hear something outside her window?"

"You think they got her, too?" Dustin asked.

"What do *you fucking think*?" Mike said again, looking very upset.

"Listen, if you're blaming yourself, it's not your fault, either." Lucas said. "It's nobody's fault but theirs. Okay? We're not blaming any of us!" They were quiet for a second, and then Lucas turned to El and said, a bit guiltily, "That includes you, too, okay?"

There was another pause, and then Lucas said, "Alright, alright, if we're going to be hiding here for a while-" he waited for protests, which didn't happen, "-if we're gonna be here for a while, I want to go get some books. Can someone come with?"

After a second, Dustin said, "I'll go. What are we looking for?"

Lucas avoided looking at El as he said, "Coding and ciphers."

El didn't look as upset as Lucas feared; instead, she looked almost relieved upon hearing that. So, well, she definitely wanted them to know what she was trying to say. That was good. At least she wasn't trying to hide things.

Lucas and Dustin left very soon, after Lucas made sure Max was really alright.

"I'm fine." Max said, a spark of annoyance in her gaze, which was a pretty good sign. "I'm fine, just get back soon, okay?" There was a silent *I can't lose you* in her glance between the boys, and they all smiled at her before leaving.

After they were gone, Lucas said, "I think, uh, the codes should be that way."

"We could ask." Dustin said.

"And look suspicious as *fuck*?" Lucas raised an eyebrow. "No way.

Let's go."

When they made it to the right section, though, there were a lot more shelves than they expected. While Lucas paused, scanning the general area, Dustin said, "I'll start at one end and you go to the other?"

"No, we're not splitting-"

"I'll be literally ten feet away at all times." Dustin said, though he wasn't great at measuring distance. "You'll see or hear if anything happens, and I will, too."

Lucas hesitated, still looking very upset at the idea of splitting up, but Dustin just patted him on the shoulder and moved towards the other side of the shelves of coding books. He understood why Lucas was so nervous- it would be *dumb* if he didn't- but that didn't mean they couldn't leave each other's sight for a minute. Besides, he just had to grab whatever books looked like they had good instructions on how to decode shit. It wasn't as if they were doing something super complicated.

He moved down the aisles pretty quickly, not wanting to spend a lot of time looking for any specific books, grabbing anything that looked useful; unfortunately, a good chunk of the books were about the History of Codes or specific Codebreakers or some shit.

He passed by one shelf completely, moving to the far end and hoping to work his way back. Dustin glanced towards the shelf, pausing when he noticed a book that didn't seem to have a title written on the side. Actually, now that he looked at it, it didn't have a Library sticker.

He paused, looking at the spine again. It seemed a bit familiar, but he couldn't place it exactly. Carefully, he reached up and pulled the book out, about to pull it down and add it to his pile.

"Hello."

Dustin jumped, the book almost falling off the shelf as he whipped around, suddenly panicked at the stranger's voice. It took him a second to calm down, and once he did, he realized that an oddly-

dressed Librarian was standing behind him.

“Oh, geez, man, don’t scare me like that.” Dustin said.

The Librarian watched him closely, and then said, “Well, young lady, have you been good to your mother?”

“What?” Dustin stared at him, completely bewildered. “What? What are you talking about?”

Slightly disappointed, the Librarian said, “Oh, I’m sorry, I thought you were someone else.”

“Yeah, apparently.” Dustin muttered.

He reached for the book again, and the Librarian said, “What are those books for?”

“School project.” Dustin said quickly.

“What kind of project?”

“Just... a project.” Dustin said. Normally he wouldn’t be so rude, but, well, he had been under *quite* a lot of stress the last few days. “You know, codes and shit.”

“Perhaps I could help.”

A surge of panic went through Dustin again, and he said, “No, no, that’s fine. I’ll just get my books and be on my way.”

“And where are-”

“*Buddy!*”

Dustin breathed a sigh of relief as Lucas rushed down the aisle, books under his arm, giving his friend a side-hug and eying the librarian carefully. “Hey,” Lucas said, “We gotta go, my Mom’s picking us up.”

“Sure, lemme just grab this.” Dustin said, taking the book, sliding it to the bottom of his pile, and saying, “Uh, thanks for your help, sir.”

The Librarian didn’t answer as they walked off.

As soon as they were out of eyeshot, Lucas said, “*This* is why we don’t split up, for the second *fucking time today!*”

“I would’ve been fine, he was just one of those adults who wants to relate to the kids.” Dustin said, though he still felt very uneasy.

“What books do you have?” Lucas asked. “Maybe we can go back.”

Dustin shuffled his books. “Uh, this one... this one has a full list, it looks promising... this one had a pretty cover... I think I remember this in the school library, and I was grabbing this when the librar-”

They both paused, looking down at the book Dustin had taken so long to grab, the one he’d barely recognized.

“Oh.” Dustin said.

“What the fuck is that?” Lucas asked.

It was the book from the hideout, except now they could see the full title.

An Incomplete History of Secret Organizations.

“Well, fuck.” Dustin said.

20. El doesn't quite like Books

CHAPTER TWENTY

El doesn't quite like Books

El was terrified.

She'd seen one of her people, one of the people who knew who she was and how to contact her *mentors* , who could find her and drag her back, and she'd be punished for running, she knew she would. She had hoped that if they didn't need her they'd just let her go, and she'd gone with the kids because they'd seemed safe and *now* she was on the run and she was in this *building* full of *books*.

Her mentors had never let her have books unless it was absolutely necessary, unless she was using them to learn codes or star maps or other important things. But books were hated, books were dangerous, she wasn't to touch them if she could avoid it. And she'd seen them burn buildings of books before, like this one. She knew how dangerous it was to be here, but what choice did they have?

Maybe she was wrong, maybe this was a good place to hide. Maybe they wouldn't think she'd go in here. Maybe they'd think she'd go somewhere safer. And maybe the books weren't as bad as she feared. After all, Mike's notebook wasn't as scary as she thought it would be. It was just like the blank paper she used to write codes and notes, only stuck together. And she could write on it, she could write things that she *couldn't* say out loud. Every time she tried, she felt panicked; she got a dark feeling in her chest and a burning sensation in her throat. She couldn't tell the secrets. They'd made sure she wouldn't. But if they could figure out the code... well, they'd earned some information. She earned information when she was good. New lessons. New things to do. Things to do so that she wasn't locked in her room to study more, to fold up origami or learn how to cook or put together puzzles or play the piano until her fingers bled. The same things, over and over and over until she could fold a clock out of paper in seconds, until she could translate the Verbal Fridge

Dialogue without thinking, until she could solve a puzzle in under a minute, and until she could play all the songs they needed for their passwords and code music.

She glanced towards Max, who had grabbed a book out of a box, about motorized vehicles, and was skimming it, occasionally stopping to stare at the wall or to play with her hair. Her hair was very long and pretty; El wished that her hair looked like that, and she guessed that now that she was free, she could grow her hair as long as she wanted. She could probably do a lot of things; hell, maybe *she* could grab a book and read it. For... fun.

Her eyes fell on Mike as she was scanning the stacks of books around them. He was sitting next to her, reading something himself, something that was about some form of creative writing. She paused, glancing towards Max again. Lucas had stopped before he left to ask her if she was okay, kneeling down eye-level and watching closely to make sure she was being honest. At least, that's what El was pretty sure he was doing. She'd been taught to read people, but she wasn't sure she was as good at it as people thought she was. She was really bad at the little cues all the adults around her seemed to be able to detect without training. But, well, she *thought* that was what Lucas had done.

And she could tell that Lucas cared a lot about Max, in maybe a slightly different way than he cared for the others. She didn't know how it was different, *what* exactly he might feel for her, but it was like some kind of... some kind of spark.

She didn't know if she felt that spark for Mike, or if he was just the person who'd been the nicest to her in her life (and was still alive) so she just liked him best, but she knew that she liked him a lot. He was a lot better than the adults who'd always been around her, better than the mentors and their dark apprentices who always had matches lit and held towards her, threatening to burn her if the adults stopped paying attention. They knew they could get away with it. (It was part of her training, to make sure that she always knew to stay in sight, to dodge attacks even when nobody was looking.) But Mike was different. He actually seemed to care, didn't ever try to hurt her when she had her back turned, made sure the others stopped being rude to her, and, strangest enough, *never* made her tell him anything she

didn't want to. VFD operated on secrets, but that seemed to not apply to the superiors, or to Papa, who had to know everything she'd ever done, everything she'd ever thought. She had to tell them everything, even when she didn't want to talk. But Mike was always alright with her when she was silent. He let her keep secrets.

So El guessed that she liked him. Maybe she liked him enough to tell him her name sometime.

But right now, she was tired of sitting and thinking, so instead she moved in front of Mike, kneeling in front of him until he noticed her, and looked up at her, saying, "Oh, uh, hi, El."

El stared for a second, before asking, "Are you okay?"

Mike stared for a second, confused. And then he said, "Oh, yeah, uh... yeah, I'm... I'm fine. Are... are you alright?"

She simply said, "Yes." He hadn't responded like Max had, but now that she thought about it, Max and Mike rarely said similar things.

"Do you... do you need anything?" Mike asked.

She shook her head. Then, quietly, she sat next to him, peering over at the book.

"Oh, uh, have you read this?" No, of course not. "I haven't either. But I like reading books about how to write. Writing's fun, you know? And I wanna do it better. I think I might wanna be a writer when I grow up, you know?"

She stayed quiet, but glanced up at him. Mike said, "Uh, would you... would you be okay if I talked about it for a bit?"

El nodded. She liked listening to him. Mike looked relieved, and he said, "Well, um, I think I like Fantasy best, which is probably why I'm good at D&D. You know what D&D is? Well, uh, it's like a game..."

Mike talked for a long while, and El listened, not really understanding half of the things he was saying but enjoying hearing him talk. Max glanced towards them occasionally, too, only half-listening but appreciating the noise. Mike rambling about something

he was interested actually made them feel a lot less nervous; as if he was reminding them that there was a future for them, a world outside of their situation.

Dustin and Lucas walked in soon, and they all looked up, and Mike said, "Oh, guys! Hey! You find anything useful?"

The boys glanced to each other, and Lucas said, "Uh, actually, we... we did."

Dustin passed most of his books to Lucas, and then he flipped one over, showing them the cover.

And El felt her blood go cold.

There it was. There was that *fucking* book.

"Holy *shit* , is that the thing we saw?" Mike said quickly.

Dustin nodded. "Look, it looks like it's all about secret societies! I bet it has everything in here!"

"Holy shit!" Max said, jumping to her feet.

"Holy shit, yeah!" Mike said, standing up. "We can- El? Are you okay?"

Everyone's attention was directed right to her, and El felt frozen for several seconds, just staring at the book in horror.

"El?" Dustin said quietly. "What-"

El suddenly let out a screech, rushing backwards and falling into a pile of paperbacks, staring in horror at the book as if it would leap forwards and attack her.

"El!" Mike ran forwards first, stopping just before reaching to try and help her up. "Are you okay?"

"Holy shit!" Dustin yelled.

"What the *fuck*?" Lucas shouted, while Max just let out a scream, a

bit muffled as she threw her hands over her mouth.

“El, what happened?” Mike asked.

El just stared over his shoulder at the book, and after a second, Mike turned around, running and grabbing it from Dustin. “Is this it?” El just let out another scream and backed away.

She didn’t want to be this upset. She *really* didn’t. But the second she saw that book...

“Look, we’ll put it away.” Mike said, and as Dustin and Lucas protested slightly, he shoved it into a box. “Now you don’t have to see it.”

“Mike, we could-”

“Is that okay, El?”

Is that okay, El?

El paused, glancing between the box and the kids, and slowly, she nodded.

“Mike, we could read from that.” Lucas said. “It could explain-”

“Whatever it is,” Mike said, “It’s probably bad. We’ll... we’ll take it with us, but let’s not... not bother El with it.”

They were silent for a second, glancing to each other, and then Lucas said, “Guess we’re spending the night here?” When no one contradicted him, he said, “Alright, I’m gonna be decoding in the corner. You guys do whatever.”

That night, they waited until they were sure the Library was closed to relax a bit. A Librarian had locked the storage closet, thankfully not even opening the door to look inside before they did, but Max was confident she could unlock it for them early in the morning before the Library opened. So they were all supposed to sleep, while Lucas volunteered to stand watch for a bit.

But El couldn't sleep. It wasn't because she wasn't comfortable; she could fall asleep on anything, really. But she was just thinking about that *book* . If it was here, they weren't safe. But she knew they were all tired, knew they wanted to hide here until they knew it was safe to come out. And she didn't want to leave without them, she was safer in large numbers, and besides... she really liked them. She wanted to help them get safe.

But that *book*...

It had just been the first book she'd burned. She'd burned it more than once. Over and over and over and over and over again until she got sick of seeing the cover, until she saw it and instantly felt her hands fly to her pocket to grab her matches.

She always wanted to burn it, always saw it and felt a fire in her heart. She'd enjoyed it at first, because the adults were very happy when she burned things. And, well, fire was very pretty. Though she learned very fast not to touch it, she liked watching the flames flicker around her, liked watching the shadows on the wall and the tufts of smoke, liked watching the kindling curl up and turn to ash.

Until one day, when she was about seven years old; she didn't have birthdays, she just guessed her age from how long her training had been going on and how old her sister had assumed she was. She'd been in her room with her sister, and people had broken into the hideout. She'd been told to stay in her room, to stay safe, but she'd gotten curious, she'd wanted to see what was going on. So while her sister called for her, she'd picked the lock and ran out of the room, peering around corners and rushing down halls to try and find the source of the problem, the source of all the noise.

When she'd passed down a hall, a woman had run past her, and tripped, and her bag had dropped, spilling all over the floor. The Book had fallen out, and El had wanted to burn it, she wanted to watch the flames consume it. But it wasn't her book. It was the lady's. So without thinking, El had grabbed the book and turned around to hand it back to the woman.

And the woman had said her name.

El had frozen, wondering how the woman knew her.

And then her mentors had come in- the *bad men* had come in- and dragged the screaming woman away. El had been dragged back to another room, and they'd yelled at her for leaving, and hurt her, and given her the matches, and told her to burn the book.

"It's not mine." she'd said.

They hadn't liked that.

And it didn't help that something had happened to her sister while she was gone.

El didn't know what. But she knew it wasn't good, because she'd never seen her sister again.

And she'd gotten punished much worse for that.

And now that book was only a few feet away from her.

All she could do was shut her eyes and wish that she could burn it now.

21. Nancy and Jonathan have a Heart-to-Heart

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Nancy and Jonathan have a Heart-to-Heart

The group was on another silent car ride, with Jonathan curled up against the window and Lydia and Steve flipping their spyglasses between them. Hopper was driving while Joyce poured over a codebook. This had quietly become their routine during these trips, mostly because the Firestarters really didn't want to talk to the others and refused to spill information to the adults.

After a second, though, Joyce turned around, watching the teenagers. Then, she said, "So, um, Lydia? Steve? What are your... your specialties?" Lydia and Steve looked up, surprised. Joyce sighed and said, "I assume you've figured out I was in this whole... I was a codebreaker."

After a second, Lydia said, "Weapons proficiency."

"Agility." Steve said.

Lydia glanced towards Jonathan and said, "Is he a photographer? He's got a camera-"

"Jonathan's not anything." Joyce said sharply. "He's not involved in this."

"And the Cop's not, either?" Steve asked.

"The name's Hopper." Hopper said, glancing back at them. "And I can still arrest you, you know."

"For what?" Lydia asked, feigning innocence.

"Well, you're pretty much self-declared arsonists."

"Technically you can't prove anything." Lydia shrugged. "And Joyce

can't testify without outing her location to our friends, can she?"

"I'm pretty sure they know I'm trying to find my son," Joyce said. "One of the Volunteers positioned in Hawkins'll have given away that I left by now."

"Well, good for you." Steve sighed.

"Not good." Jonathan didn't quite pick up on the sarcasm. "Mom doesn't want them to find us."

"Maybe they'll just... bring your kid right back." Lydia said sourly. "Figure, what the hell, since you actually *want* this one..."

"That's not how they work." Joyce retorted.

"Why'd they take him anyway?" Steve asked. "If you didn't want them to."

"It's not like they *asked*." Joyce rolled her eyes.

Steve jumped, surprised; this was news to him. Lydia glanced towards the car floor, biting her lip, her face blank.

They were silent for a long time, until Hopper informed them that they had to stop for gas. After he pulled off the road and into a station, Lydia jumped up and opened the door.

"And where are you going?" Hopper asked.

"Need to breathe." she responded, walking off. Jonathan followed her with his eyes as she turned around the corner of the convenience store next to the station, and vanished.

"She shouldn't be alone." Joyce said quietly, also watching her.

"I could-" Steve began.

"We're, uh, not letting you two run off alone." Hopper said.

"What? Scared we're gonna make out or something?" Steve rolled his eyes. "Cause it's not like that."

"We'd rather not have two arsonists we don't trust running off on their own while we're in the middle of nowhere." Hopper replied.

Steve sighed. "Yeah, that checks out."

"I'll go." Joyce said.

"No, I'll go." Jonathan said. As Joyce looked towards him, surprised, he said, "Well, uh, you two just kinda had a fight. She probably won't wanna talk to you."

"Just... come back soon." Joyce said.

Jonathan nodded, and then jumped out of the car, as Hopper also left to fill up the gas tank. He took a bit of time walking over to the side of the store- he didn't want to scare her, really, he just wanted to see what was up with her.

When he turned the corner, he stopped for a second, watching as she lit a cigarette. He waited for a minute, then walked towards her and leaned against the wall.

"Come to babysit me?" Lydia asked sharply.

"Well, that's what Hop and Mom wanted." Jonathan said quietly. "I just... wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm *fine*." Lydia said sharply.

Jonathan watched as she lit the cigarette, and he said softly, "I, uh, didn't know you smoked."

Lydia paused a second, before exhaling and saying, "Most of us do."

"My Mom smokes." Jonathan said, not entirely sure why he was sharing this information. "Sometimes. When she's stressed."

"Impressive." Lydia smirked. "The Firefighters hate these. Hate anything to do with fire, really. They banned candles for the longest time, only recently started letting them filter in again. Maybe it's a form of rebellion or some shit?"

Jonathan shrugged, as Lydia started coughing a little. "I don't know."

"Has she told you anything about her... experiences with VFD?" Nancy asked.

"A little." Jonathan admitted. "But not enough to let me know... you know, a lot about it. About what they do."

"Well, that's what Steve and I are here for." Lydia smirked, punching him playfully on the shoulder.

Jonathan smiled at her. Yeah, he liked hearing about VFD from the teens. He knew that his Mom was definitely right, it was probably a cult who'd *absolutely* kidnapped his brother, but... well, it was stuff he felt like he should know. It was his Mom's childhood, it might be Family History. And not all of it sounded bad; it was just some codes and tech.

Carefully, Jonathan asked, "What do you do for fun?"

"For what?" Lydia asked.

"Fun." Jonathan shrugged. "You know, when you're not being a spy or an arsonist."

"We're training." Lydia said.

"When you've got a break."

Lydia paused, taking a long time to consider as she continued to smoke. Finally, she said, "I like messing around at the shooting range. I'm great at everything they've got. Harpoon guns, arrows, throwing stars... I can hit anything I want. And sometimes Steve and I like to play board games, if we can find them. And poker."

"Will and I used to play chess a lot." Jonathan said. "I wasn't that good at it, but neither was he, so..."

"What else did you two do?"

"Shared music." Jonathan said. "Talked about life. Sometimes we'd go out to the field and he'd draw and I'd photograph." He paused.

"We can't hang out much, though. I've been working, so we can afford the house. So I don't have a lot of free time."

"Well, apparently once we're adults we'll get a lot of money for our Firestarting work." Lydia shrugged. "That's what they tell us anyway. From fortunes, and odd jobs, and theft... so we won't have to worry about jobs or shit. VFD is our job."

Jonathan paused, wondering why she was telling him this.

And then he got a very, very bad feeling.

No, that's not... that's not what we're doing.

Slowly, he said, "Hey, uh, this thing we're doing, where you tell me codes and shit..."

"Yeah?"

"That's not... that's not a *recruitment* thing, is it?"

Lydia stared at him, looking a little confused. She dropped the cigarette slightly, before asking, "Would you... like it to be?"

That was the wrong answer.

But before Jonathan could say anything, Joyce rounded the corner, saying, "Hey, car's gassed up. We're ready to go."

"Okay." Jonathan said quietly.

Joyce put a hand on Lydia's shoulder as she started to move, though, saying, "Hey, can we talk for a second?"

Lydia glanced towards Jonathan, before nodding. He glanced between the two of them before hesitantly leaving, and Joyce said, "Listen, I... we clearly had different experiences with VFD."

"You're telling me." Lydia rolled her eyes.

Joyce flinched, but said, "But... I do want to say that I'm glad you're helping us, and I'm not... I'm not going to try and fight you on the

organization, okay? I just want... if you ever need anything, you can just ask me, okay?"

Lydia paused, before saying, "Why? So you can tell me how wrong I am?"

"No, I just... I want to help, if you need it."

Lydia still stared at her in confusion, trying to figure out how this was a trap. Finally, she said, "Okay."

"Alright." Joyce said. "Now, let's get back to the car before Steve sets it on fire."

"He doesn't light cars." Lydia said, dropping the cigarette to the ground and shoving her hands in her jacket pockets as they walked off. "We light houses and headquarters and the occasional movie theater."

"If you say so."

22. Dustin and Max have Parental Issues

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Dustin and Max have Parental Issues

When Lucas eventually decided to sleep, he let Dustin guard. Max had slept a little bit, but wasn't really able to stay comfortable on a hard floor with only hardcover books for comfort.

She heard Dustin grab a book and flip through it, but she didn't think much of it; Dustin loved to read, of course he'd be doing that while trying to stay awake. Hell, maybe Lucas had let him take over decoding for a bit. Mostly, she was just thinking about... well, about Billy. She could still feel his grip on her shoulder, still hear her heart pounding in her chest. Why did she have to freeze up when she heard him? Why couldn't she have just kicked him in the nuts and run? She'd told herself a thousand times that she'd do just that as soon as she could, that she'd make sure he never hurt her again, but... but she'd just *frozen*.

Then she heard a quiet sob.

She froze, so lost in her thoughts she hadn't recognized who'd cried. She paused, wondering if she should get up, but after a second, she heard Dustin's voice, shaking slightly. "Is anyone awake?" he asked softly.

Slowly, Max sat up. Mike, Lucas and El were still asleep, apparently, because they didn't get up. Dustin was sitting against the door, and Max jumped as she saw what book he was reading.

"I thought Mike put that away." Max whispered, staring at *The Incomplete History*.

"I wasn't... wasn't gonna read it." Dustin said carefully, as Max stood up to move next to him. "But I wanted to know... know what was scaring El. I didn't... I didn't read much, I swear, but... look."

Max sat down beside him, looking over a page about some guy named Anwhistle. "There's..." Dustin said. "There's notes on all the pages, from a bunch of different people. They're all written in code, of course, but..." He pointed to one line of code, written underneath a paragraph.

"Does that... mean something?" Max asked.

Dustin nodded. "That's... that's my Dad's handwriting."

Oh, *shit*.

Max looked up at him, as Dustin shut the book and shoved it into the nearest box, crossing his arms and struggling not to cry. After a pause, Max said, "You think... you think he's involved in this?"

"I don't know, I..." he sighed. "I... I *don't know*. But if Mike's sister's in this and your stepbrother, and now *my Dad*..." he curled up slightly. "What if we can't go home?"

"Wh-what?"

"What if our families are... if my Dad was part of it and your stepbrother's out here- does your stepdad know where he is or does he not know he's part of it? And if they wanted both Mike and his sister..."

"Are you saying..." Max asked carefully, "That you *really* think our families are in on this?"

Dustin's silence was her answer.

"Lucas... Lucas's parents don't seem like they'd let that happen." Max said after a second. "And Ms. Byers *definitely* wouldn't-"

"But would Will's Dad?"

"I never met him..."

"El said those arsonists were her family, and they're apparently related to the people who took us. What if that's why we were taken, because our families *let them*?"

"They... they wouldn't." Max said. "Nobody would just *let* their child get kidnapped, not even an asshole like my stepdad."

"Max, if we go back, what if they just send us right back to the people who took us?" Dustin asked.

"That's not going to happen!"

"How do you *know*?"

"I..."

"If my Dad's in on it," Dustin asked, "Is my *Mom*? Did she know? If your stepfamily's in on it, what about your parents?"

"We'll go to the Hawkins police." Max said quickly. "Be-before our families. They'll-"

"What if the arsonists infiltrated Hawkins police, too?" Dustin said. "What if no matter what we do, we just end up with this VFD shit?"

"Dustin, that's not going to happen." Max said. "We're... we're gonna go home and everything will be okay."

"And if it's not?"

Max paused. "Well, if... if they let us get kidnapped, they... they must have a good reason, right?" Dustin stared at her. "Yeah, I know, I can't think of much either, but..."

"If they... Max, this is literally, no joke, the *worst* thing that's ever happened to me." Dustin said. "If my Mom... if my *parents* ... if they planned this... I can't... Max, I *can't*..."

Max leaned over and hugged him, and Dustin buried his head in her shoulder and started to cry.

They didn't say anything else the rest of the night.

By the time the others woke up, Dustin had already put the book

back where he'd found it, not having the heart to read through more. "Should we try to leave now?" Mike asked, glancing between everyone. "You think Billy's still looking for us?"

"Probably." Max said carefully. "But... but we should try to keep going. Can't hide here forever, you know?"

"I don't know..." Lucas said carefully. "If Billy called in reinforcements, we may want to lay low for a couple of days."

"We should get as far away from him as we can." Max argued.

"But if he and his friends are running around outside-"

"We just need to *run*." Max said, standing up and running her hands through her hair.

The others stood pretty quickly, too, as Mike said, "Max, let's just hang out here. Nobody'll question us-"

"I dunno, that Librarian was pretty weird." Dustin said.

"Leave." El said suddenly, causing everyone to jump. "Let's leave."

"No, no, we can't just go." Mike said. "If they find us and we get caught, it's *over*. We're stuck with whichever organization managed to get to us first."

"It's super early." Max said. "None of the adults will be at the Library, and if Billy's friends are around, it'll be dark enough for us to be able to hide ourselves easier. We'll stop to return some of the coding books, steal some food from that cafe, and I think there were bags for sale towards the door, we can grab a couple of those."

Dustin and Lucas both looked very concerned at the idea of stealing, but finally, Mike relented. "Okay, okay, just... we have to be careful. And nobody travels alone. El with me, and-"

"I'll go with you." Lucas volunteered, shooting Max an apologetic look before glancing towards El.

"Okay." Mike said. "Oh, and... someone grab the... *the* book. We'll

shove it in the bottom of a bag.”

Max was the one who grabbed it, holding it so El didn't have to look at it much. El looked pleasantly surprised at Mike's concern, but she still looked very wary.

“Okay, we'll go grab bags, and then Dustin and Max will return the books and the rest of us will get food from the cafe.”

They all nodded, and Mike said, “Alright, Max, uh... pick the lock.”

“Okay, let's make this quick.” Mike said.

He and Lucas had both grabbed bags, and had just managed to find the cafe, with El trailing behind them. Max and Dustin had split off earlier, after Max had shoved the pad box into Lucas's bag and told them not to run off without them.

Lucas jumped over the counter, moving towards the cabinets and scanning through. “Uh, lots of snack bags. Think that'll be good?”

“For now. Just remember, we're going to just find a bus or a train again.” Mike said.

“I'd prefer a bus. Would like to not jump out of a train again.” Lucas shrugged. “Bus might be easier to get out of and not hurt as much.”

“Good thinking.” Mike said, leaning over the counter to try and see into the cabinets Lucas was opening. “El, you ever been on a bus?” He paused, before turning back around. “El?”

El was wandering around the sitting area, standing underneath a painting. She knocked on it, and then flinched, jumping back.

“El?” Mike moved closer, stopping just beside the rug. “What is it?”

El paused, staring at the painting, one that looks vaguely familiar, of a girl and a dog. She started towards the counter, sliding down it and sitting on the floor, shaking her head. *Nevermind* was the clear message.

But instead, Mike moved underneath the painting, and after knocking on it like El had, he put his hands under it and removed it from the wall, only barely having to maneuver to get it off the nail it hung from.

Then he froze.

“Lucas...” he said carefully. “Go get Max and Dustin.”

“What the *fuck*?” Max said.

By the time Lucas had come back, Dustin and Max had managed to put the books back, and Mike had finished packing some food in the bags. As he handed the bag to El and moved back to the wall, Max, Dustin and Lucas stared ahead in confusion and horror.

Underneath the place where the painting had been, a safe was hidden, which normally wouldn't be cause for alarm. What *was* an issue was the symbol etched into the safe, right above the combination code.

“It's that fucking eye.” Max said, moving closer and tracing it. “The VFD eye.”

“Why do they have a safe in the Library?” Lucas asked.

“Wait,” Dustin said, everything suddenly hitting him. “Were... have we been hiding in a VFD place *all night*?”

They stared at each other, and then Max said, “That's it, we have to leave, *now* .”

“Wait.” Mike said, moving closer to the safe. “I wanna see what's in it.”

“There are ten-thousand possible combinations for a four-digit code like that.” Dustin said. “You'll never guess it.”

“El?” Mike asked, glancing towards the girl, who was hovering near the back of the group, looking at the ground. “Do you have any

ideas?”

El considered, and then moved towards the lock. She glanced around them guiltily, before turning the knob to 2264 .

She pulled on it. It remained shut.

She narrowed her eyes, before trying 9115.

Still nothing.

“Are those normal codes?” Dustin asked, fascinated.

El nodded, before trying, 2512 and then 1914.

And then she shut her eyes, and breathed deeply, bracing herself for something.

0011.

It unlocked.

But before El could pull the door all the way open, they heard another door open.

“That sounded like the front door.” Lucas said, as they all turned towards the sound.

“It’s not Library hours.” Dustin said.

They froze, and then Max said, “We need to go.”

El opened the safe door quickly, but she froze, confused, when she looked inside. Mike peered over her shoulder, and said, “It’s empty- wait, no, there’s-”

“Who *cares*, we have to go!” Max said.

Mike reached in, and pulled out what looked just like El’s spyglass, only split in half. He shoved it into his bag and said, “You’re right, let’s move.”

23. The Gang jumps down a Hole

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Gang jumps down a Hole

The back door was locked.

“Goddamnit!” Max yelled, kicking it before reaching into her pocket for her hairpin.

“Wait, wait!” Lucas said, having stopped near a window. He peered through it, froze, and then ducked to the ground. “There are people out there!”

“Fucking hell!” Max yelled.

“Don’t shout, someone’s already in here!” Dustin said. “You heard the door open!”

“What the *fuck* are we supposed to do?” Max asked.

“Break a window?” Mike suggested.

“Okay, we need to find a side of the building nobody’s on.” Max said.

“Okay, uh...” Mike said, and then he gestured vaguely to the right and they rushed in that direction, trying desperately not to trip over themselves, trying very hard to listen, just in case they heard someone coming towards them.

By the time they reached a wall with a window, and Dustin peered out and concluded that if someone was by this wall, he couldn’t see them, Mike had managed to find a chair he could lift. However, as he threw it at the window, it simply bounced off.

They stared at the chair for a second, and then Max said, “*Really?*”

“Sorry!” Mike said. “Guess it wasn’t heavy.”

“Or maybe you’re a weak little bitch.” Max said. “Let me try.”

“Don’t you guys think that using a chair to break a window might be, I don’t know, *loud*?” Lucas suggested, as Max picked up the chair.

“And draw attention?” Dustin added, picking up on Lucas’s point.

“Do you suggest sitting around in the Library while our kidnappers run around looking for us?” Max asked.

“Technically,” Mike said, “We don’t know it’s them-”

“With our luck,” Max said, “It’s definitely fucking them.”

El suddenly raised her hand, and when they all turned towards her, she gave them a small smile and then took off running in another direction.

“El!” Mike yelled, rushing after her.

“Holy shit!” Dustin said, as the rest of them followed, with Max letting out several curse words under her breath.

El rushed down the halls, moving towards one of the back study rooms. She tried to open the door, only to pause once she realized it was locked, giving Mike and the others time to catch up.

“El, don’t *do* that!” Mike said. “We have to stick together-”

El knelt down towards the handle, examining it.

“Why are we going in there?” Lucas asked El.

El just held out her hand towards Max.

“What?” Max asked, bewildered.

“Hairpin.” El simply said.

Max paused, and then handed her a hairpin. “You know, I can-”

El stuck the hairpin in the handle, moving a lot faster than the others thought possible as she picked the lock. “Holy shit.” Max muttered,

as El tossed the hairpin back and pushed the door open, rushing in and starting to push the table against the wall.

After a second, Mike also started pushing the table, as Lucas said, “*What* is going on?”

“I don’t know, but if El thinks it’ll help...” Mike called back.

Dustin glanced over his shoulder, and though Mike couldn’t see what he saw, he did see Dustin’s expression morph to terror as he pushed Lucas and Max into the study room and whipped around, shutting the door. “Barricade!” Dustin yelled, grabbing a chair and shoving it under the handle.

“Did you see anyone?” Lucas asked, as Mike and El pushed the table against the wall.

“No,” Dustin rolled his eyes as he backed up. “I just thought this would be fun.”

“Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*” Max said.

Mike and El, meanwhile, glanced underneath the table, where a rug was placed. Mike turned to El, and they both seemed to understand what they had to do very quickly. They each moved to one end of the rug and lifted it, tossing it onto the table.

Mike froze, then, staring at the ground, as El dropped to her knees.

Max, Dustin and Lucas turned, then, and stared with Mike.

Under the table was what looked like the top of a trapdoor, emblazoned with the same VFD eye that was stuck onto the safe and onto El’s ankle.

Before they could say anything, they heard someone try to push the door, and they turned to see two people standing behind it, dressed in dark colors.

“Children, open the door.” one said.

There was a pause, before Mike said, “El, get the trapdoor. Dustin,

Lucas, Max, add to the barricade.”

The three kids nodded and grabbed chairs, throwing them at the door despite the adults’ protests. Mike knelt by El, watching as she managed to pull the door open. Inside was what looked like a dark drop; he didn’t know how far it went down, nor what would be at the bottom.

“Children!” came one of the adults’ voices. “We’re trying to help you!”

“Bullshit!” Lucas yelled, as they all stepped back towards Mike and El. “*Bullshit!*”

“If you’ll just listen to us-”

“You listen to *us!*” Max yelled, reaching out to grab Dustin’s arm and squeeze it; now that Mike looked, his friend looked *very* uncomfortable. “We’re going to get the *fuck* out of here, we’re going to take back our friend, and then we’ll fucking *destroy* you, understand? We’ll *destroy* you, and we’ll go home!”

One of the adults looked at them, very darkly, and said, “You think you can go home?”

Max and Dustin both paled, as Lucas said, “Of course we can!”

“You can’t go home *and* leave us.” the adult said.

Mike froze, then, while El glanced between them, very confused at their horrified reactions. She didn’t understand that this was the *last* thing they wanted to hear. “What... what are you talking about?” Mike said, hoping to God they didn’t answer.

“Like every other recruit,” said the adult, as the other was still working on pushing open the door, “Your families knew what was going to happen.”

No.

“Do you think we just picked you randomly? We were watching you for years.” said the adult. “And your parents are with us.”

They all, deep down, knew that was likely. But that didn't make hearing it any easier.

"You're lying." Lucas just said, his voice breaking slightly. "You're lying, you're *lying*..."

One of the chairs barricading the door slid, just an inch, and the door opened, just an inch.

But it was enough to startle Mike into moving.

He grabbed El's hand, and then said, "Go, go, go!"

The kids gave the adults one more terrified glance, and then leapt into the hole.

They landed quite quickly, though it was a bit rough, possibly because they were still pretty sore from leaping off a train.

The second they all could move, Mike said, "We have to go, they'll be in the room soon."

"Mike..." Lucas began, still a little shell-shocked.

"El, do you know these tunnels?" Mike asked.

El considered, glancing around, and then shrugged.

"Okay, we just need to hurry and move. Hopefully they won't find us." Mike said. "Let's move."

"Mike!" Lucas said, standing up and staring ahead as he helped Max to her feet. "Mike, they just said..."

"Just *run*." Mike said sternly. "And we'll figure it all out once we're out of here."

They glanced at each other, each trying hard to not look as broken as they felt. Finally, they nodded at each other, and El led the way down one tunnel. Once they realized that it was incredibly dark, they

grabbed hands, making a sort-of line down the tunnel, gripping onto each other as if they were the only stable things in the world.

They just might have been.

They walked for a very long time in complete silence, aside from the occasional swear after tripping, or soft conversation starter that went ignored. They weren't sure how long they were walking, only that it couldn't have been less than several hours.

Finally, after a while, Dustin said, "Let's take a break, we've been walking forever and we could use some food."

Hesitantly, they all sat, and Max passed around some snack bags they'd smuggled from the convenience store. They were still silent for a while, until Lucas said, "Do you think it was true?" When no one answered, he said, "They... they could've made it up. To get us to go with them."

"I..." Dustin paused, before saying, "I think my Dad was in on this. I saw... he... yeah, he was... probably..."

"If Billy's in on this, my stepdad is, too." Max said quietly. "Probably my Mom. Not sure about my Dad, but, like, he did seem to spend a lot of time talking to Librarians, and... and stuff."

"And if they got my sister, I guess... I guess it makes sense that my parents would know about it." Mike said softly.

"But *my* parents wouldn't..." Lucas said. "They wouldn't... and Ms. Byers would *not* have agreed to this. You all know how protective she is of Will."

"If they're right..." Max said quietly. "If they're right and we can't go home..."

"They're just trying to scare us." Lucas said.

"If we *can't* go home," Max continued, shutting her eyes and clenching her fists around her shirt fabric, "What are we gonna do?"

None of them had an answer, so they all fell silent. Finally, Lucas said, "My parents, they'll take care of us..."

"Lucas..." Dustin said quietly. "Lucas, I think they're right. All our parents are in on it. They all let us sleep over at Mike's- except Max's- and if they knew it was Kidnapping Day..."

"They couldn't have known. They couldn't..."

"They did." El suddenly said, and everyone stopped.

"No." Lucas said. "No, you can't be..."

"They ask." El said softly. "They told my siblings. They always ask."

There was a long, long silence, as they processed what El had said, silently still eating. Mike quietly passed out water bottles, too, and after a second, Lucas spoke, in a slightly broken voice. "Let's keep going."

"Lucas..." Max began.

"Let's *keep going*."

They sighed, and then stood up, holding hands, and followed El into the dark.

24. Will steals a Radio

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Will steals a Radio

“It’s time to move again.”

Will sighed, opening his eyes. This was his wake-up call, huh?

The twins had transferred him a few days ago to his new chaperone, who only referred to himself as J. Will thought he was supposed to guess his full name, but he didn’t care to.

“Who am I going to?” Will asked, sliding off the bed and carefully wrapping his foot before slipping into his shoes; he’d slept in his clothes from the day before, too tired from yesterday’s gardening to even wash up.

“No, *we’re* moving.” J said. “Firestarters were spotted on the other side of town, and we’re getting out before they can find us.”

“Fucking wonderful.” Will yawned, grabbing his provided jacket.

“Language.”

“Suck a di-”

When Will started to turn towards the motel door, J grabbed his arm, pulling it back and gripping hard. Will struggled not to flinch, not to show his panic on his face. There was a tense silence, the grip tightening every second, and then Will said, “I... I’m sorry. Where are we going?”

“Hopefully Beaumont, but I’m waiting for a response on my radio-grab that, will you?”

“Where is it?”

J narrowed his eyes, before gesturing. As Will opened the closet to pull the small handheld radio out, he smiled slightly, knowing that however suspicious his chaperone was that the radio was being used, he had no evidence quite yet. He pocketed it and turned back to his mentor, making his face blank and passive again.

“So until we get a response, we’re heading towards a nice Lakeside down. You been in one of those yet?”

Will very much didn’t want to talk right now, but he knew he’d get yelled at if he didn’t respond; it would be perceived as rude. “Yes.”

“What happened?”

“I made it halfway across the lake before you guys dragged me back.”

“Quite impressive.”

Under his breath, Will muttered, “Would’ve been more impressive if I’d’ve gotten away.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

J glared at him, but took the radio and said, “Now, once we’re in the taxi, I’m going to need you to read through *Ramona Quimby* and highlight specific passages.”

Will decided against asking why, instead just shrugging. He briefly wondered if he could grab something heavy and knock out his chaperone, but, well, he’d rather be with *these* fuckers than the firestarters, and if they were nearby, chances are that they would find him. Plus, he had no idea where he was or how far he was from Hawkins.

But it was okay. He’d get home eventually. He’d get home and he’d see his family again. At least, he hoped so.

The taxi ride was long and boring, and once they arrived at their next

stop, Will handed the book back to J, thanked the driver, and the two of them walked down a dirt path towards a gloomy-looking town.

Once they arrived at their designated house, though, Will was surprised to see two more adults inside. J didn't visibly react, but when he asked, "What are you here for?" Will figured out quickly that he was also caught unawares.

"Who are you?" Will asked, glancing between them.

J rolled his eyes, but he said, "These are M and G." *For the love of fuck.* "They're other Volunteers." Obviously.

"There's been a change of plan." said M- or maybe G? No, this girl seemed like M. "We're taking Byers to another city while you'll be stationed here."

"What?" Will asked, looking up in confusion. "No, J just said I wasn't-"

"You heard them, Byers. Change of plan." J shrugged, and handed G the copy of *Ramona Quimby*. "Here's his work so far-"

Will bit his lip, desperately trying not to just throw himself at the adults and start punching. He was so *tired* of being tossed around from town to town, of doing random things for what seemed to be no reason, of being told over and over that his kidnapping was for a good reason. And he didn't know if these two even had a radio, or if he'd be able to use it.

"Byers, you'll be coming with us." G said.

Will paused, glancing between them, and then he said, "I... I don't want to."

J groaned, while M just said, "Seriously, kid. It'll be fine. We're going to a nice town right underneath a mountain. We can even show you how to climb it."

"But that wasn't the plan."

"If you're going to be a Volunteer," G said, "You're going to need to

learn how to improvise.”

Will almost felt like his chest was burning from complete frustration. “I don’t *want* to be a Volunteer!”

The adults all rolled their eyes, the way adults do when children say something stupid.

Then, G said the wrong thing. A very, very wrong thing.

“Gosh, was his Mom this difficult?”

Will was completely frozen, as M said, “Hell no. She just followed instructions like a *good* apprentice, you’d think he’d do something similar.”

“Well, maybe if he’s different, he won’t end up-”

“You’re lying.” Will said simply, staring at them in complete horror.

They turned to him, a bit confused. “What?”

Will started walking backwards, shaking his head. “You didn’t say that. You didn’t say that, you’re *lying*.”

“Byers, stop-”

Will shook his head and took off down a hall, knowing full well that they were definitely following him. He couldn’t run faster than them, he knew, so the second he saw a window, he pushed it open and climbed through, falling to the ground. He landed in the dirt, cursing as he got his clothes stained. He scrambled up, glancing around wildly. There was the rest of town up ahead, maybe he could find someone who would help him, who would *believe* he had been kidnapped and then...

And then...

They couldn’t be right. They couldn’t be. His Mom wouldn’t... she couldn’t be a part of this, and if she was, she wouldn’t have let them take him away, she wouldn’t have... but then *why wouldn’t she tell him* ?

He should've run. He knew that. He should've run. But instead, he slid to the ground, crouching in the dirt, and he buried his head in his knees and sobbed.

By the time the adults caught up, he'd already completely broken down, shaking as he sobbed. J said something rude, something to the effect of *get up* or *you're in trouble*, which G seemed to join in on, but Will didn't bother trying to process what they were saying, instead continuing his cries.

Eventually, though, he felt a hand over his, and M whisper, "You okay, kid?" He didn't respond, and she just said, "It's alright, let it all out."

"M, just-"

"Shut *up* ." M said harshly, and then she turned back to Will, who'd jumped slightly. "It's alright. Let it out." After a few moments, Will calmed down slightly, and she said, "Feel any better?"

"No." he managed.

"Ah, that's okay." she said softly. "You'll feel good soon, though. You ready to move?"

Will hesitantly nodded, and then M helped him to his feet. She glanced between J and G and said, "J, why don't you get the rest of your stuff? We'll take it from here."

J stayed silent as he left, and then M said, "Alright, sweetheart. We've got a room for you to rest in, you can stay for a bit while G and I finish packing. Did you bring anything with you?"

Something sparked in Will's head, but he shook his head quickly enough that she clearly believed him. "Alright, then." she said. "G, let's get everything ready. You just tell us when you're ready to head out, alright kid?"

Will was brought to a small room- with locked windows, of course- and left there, apparently to calm down. They probably hoped that his "rebelliousness" was just from nerves, or exhaustion, or something else they could cure.

But as soon as he was sure the adults were out of earshot, he reached into his pocket, pulling out the handheld radio. J probably thought he'd left it in the bags, and by the time he realized he'd lost it, hopefully Will would be far, far away.

The smaller radio had less of a signal, but it was still *something*. He got up to listen at the door again, before crouching in the corner and tuning into the usual station.

But before he dared to send out a signal, he paused. He'd been so convinced that they were lying about his Mom, that she wouldn't dare let them take him away, but they'd talked about her to themselves as if they all knew her. As if they all remembered her.

Were they right? And if they were, would his Mom even help him if she heard his signal? Would his brother? Did *Jonathan* know? And if his friends found out and saved him, where would they go if they couldn't go home?

He slowly fumbled with the radio, turning it on more out of a sense of habit than anything else. And he slowly started to sing again.

"If I go there will be trouble..."

"If I stay it will be double..."

"So... so come on and let me know..."

Before he knew it, he was sobbing again.

Joyce paused, looking up from her coding book; she'd been reviewing for the last several days on the road, making sure she knew her own codes inside and out and could learn the new codes that were in the book Karen had given to her- *An Incomplete* something-or-other, she was bad at names. But they'd spent several almost-silent days on the road, and Joyce still didn't quite trust the teens they had with them.

She'd thought over every scenario in her head; maybe they were with the Volunteers and were trying to keep them far away from where the kids actually were. Maybe they were planning on leading them

into a trap so they could get rid of a Volunteer Codebreaker. Maybe they were planning to kidnap the kids themselves.

But, really, they were still *kids*. They were Jonathan's age, they'd probably been raised with the VFD, like she had. She didn't *want* to be suspicious of them.

Slowly, she stood up, telling Jonathan she was going to get something and she'd be right back. He nodded from his book, and after she made sure the door was unlocked so he could get out in a hurry, she went over to the teens' hotel room and knocked on the door.

The door opened remarkably quickly, and Lydia glanced out, looking a bit excited. Her expression fell blank when she saw Joyce, and she said carefully, "Uh, hello, Byers. What're you here for?"

"Can I come in?" she asked.

Lydia paused, then glanced behind her, probably looking at Steve. She then turned back, saying, "Yeah, yeah, of course."

Joyce walked in, glancing around the room cautiously. Steve was sitting in a chair in the corner, flipping a match between his fingers, while Lydia had her spyglass lying on the bed. Joyce stared at it for a second, and Lydia caught her gaze, saying, "You have one of these, I assume?"

"Used to." was all Joyce said.

After a second, Lydia said, "Well, what are you here for?"

Joyce paused. What *was* she here for? "Just... wanted to make sure you were doing okay. We've been on the road for a while..."

"Steve and I are on the road all the time." Lydia shrugged. "This is more of our comfort zone than Headquarters was."

Joyce sat down on a chair, before asking, "Steve, could you stop with the match? If that gets lit-"

"It won't." Steve said, though he hesitantly pocketed the match. "And

it's a habit."

"You must have some weird Volunteer habits, right?" Lydia asked, flipping the spyglass in her hands. "Cause you're a Volunteer?"

"Was." Joyce said stubbornly. "And, yes, the habits are hard to break." *Like being suspicious of everyone around you.*

"How did you leave?" Steve asked carefully. "Did they, like, grant you retirement or-"

"I had to run away." Joyce said. "And even then, I don't know how long I was actually hidden."

They were silent for a second, and then Lydia asked, "*Why* did you leave?"

"What?"

"If you just wanted to piss off the Volunteers, you could've just joined the Firestarters." Lydia shrugged. "Why make the jump to leaving?"

"It's a cult." Joyce simply said. Lydia and Steve shared a look, and then Joyce said, "I... I was a bit worried about something, though. I, uh, read over the files your side had on the Hawkins kids. They didn't have much, which I expected, but they, um, had a lot on me, and uh... apparently Mike's sister is possibly on your side? The files were a bit... cryptic. Would you... happen to know anything about her?"

Lydia flinched, which was about what Joyce had expected. Steve remained neutral and he said, "Not sure what you're on about."

"Well, I was just wondering-"

Lydia sharply looked up and said, "What exactly do you want from us?"

Joyce paused. "Do you... do you kids need anything?"

"We're not kids." Lydia replied. "And I *want* to know what you want from us."

“I want to make sure you’re all comfortable doing this.” Joyce said. “And that you’re safe.” The teens glanced to each other, and then Joyce said, “If you... if you need anything, just let me know.”

After she left, she briefly wondered if she should listen at the door, see what they’d say about her. But those were her Volunteer instincts. They needed their privacy.

And she needed to sleep. They needed to get to Headquarters as soon as possible.

25. Mike is Pissed

Notes for the Chapter:

hey, guys! Sorry I keep posting so late, rehearsals go on for a while, and these chapters take a while to write lol. I've been missing your comments, but it's nice to know you guys are still reading.

The World is Quiet Here :)

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Mike is Pissed

The kids were pretty sure that they walked for almost a day.

They weren't sure where they were going or exactly how long they'd been down in the tunnels, but eventually they'd just passed out from exhaustion, falling asleep on each other. When they awoke, they kept walking, and kept quiet.

Finally, El stopped them, gesturing upwards at what seemed like a thinner piece of the ceiling. They figured out pretty quickly what it was, and she managed to climb on Mike's shoulders and poke the trapdoor open. She climbed out and helped the rest up, and then they collapsed on a wooden floor instead of a dirt one.

The first one to actually sit up and observe their surroundings was El, but closely followed by Lucas and Mike. Max and Dustin laid on the floor and tried to sleep for a minute, but eventually they got up, too.

In silence, they surveyed their surroundings. They were in some kind of house, with wood floors and darkly-painted walls. They seemed to be in some kind of living room, with a couch in a corner, an old TV placed against the wall, and a fireplace behind them. Two windows were on either side of the room, and a door was partly ajar, leading to another room in the house. It looked pretty abandoned; dust was everywhere, and Mike was pretty sure he saw a spiderweb in the

corner. But it didn't look *super* dirty.

"Okay..." Mike said, surprised at how *tired* he sounded. "Okay, I think we're alone, but we'll check anyway. If this is a house, like I think it is, we'll find a place to wash up, and I'll wash everyone's clothes. We're all completely covered in shit, so it could take a while, but it's better than nothing, right?"

"Better than nothing." Lucas repeated glumly, not looking any of them in the eye.

They did find a bathroom, and they let El wash up first, while the rest of them explored the house. There were four rooms on the bottom floor: a living room, a kitchen, some kind of music room, and the front room with a locked front door. Unfortunately for them, it was locked from the outside, so they'd have to climb out a window if they needed to leave. The bathroom was on the top floor, along with one bedroom and what looked like some kind of meeting room, with a table and two empty cabinets, along with a chalkboard.

Max thought it was all a bit surreal. After almost a week of this shit happening to them, they were in what seemed to be a completely normal house- except for the meeting room, most families didn't have that- but it was still *completely empty*. She kept close to the others, not wanting to be split from them for long, and *definitely* not wanting to be alone in this house.

Mike found several pairs of pajamas in the bedroom, and he left one for El while he washed her clothes, and when she came out in them, trying to maneuver around the oversized outfit, Mike handed the another pair to Lucas and let him wash up next. Max and Dustin had previously made themselves comfortable in the living room. They attempted to go through the *Incomplete History* again, but after only two pages they'd both felt a *lot* of dread and just shoved it back in the bag.

Dustin washed up next, and Lucas just sat in the corner until his clothes were clean and continued working on de-coding El's notes, while El sat in front of the TV, enraptured by the soap opera that was

playing. Max tried to get invested, but she just felt distracted the whole time.

When Dustin came down, he said, “Uh, Max, there’s, um... there’s a hairbrush on the sink. If you need it.”

Max nodded and left, leaving her clothes on the floor outside the bathroom for Mike to wash; she didn’t really like making him clean her stuff, but he didn’t seem like he needed the help, and she likely wouldn’t have been good assistance, anyway.

It took her forever to clean up, since she had been covered in dirt for the last several days. And her hair was *impossible* to brush; it was so knotted and filthy that she seriously considered grabbing the scissors in the sink drawer and chopping it all off. But eventually it was presentable enough that she could get most of the knots out and join the others downstairs. Dustin took over the clothes-washing from Mike, and after he was done, they all gathered in the living room, sitting in front of the TV for a bit. After a second, Mike leaned forwards, turning it off, and he said, “So, are we gonna talk about it?”

“Bout what?” Lucas asked.

“What we’re gonna do.” Mike said. “We can’t go home. If even *one* of our parents is in on this, we won’t be safe.”

Max fell silent, staring at her lap, as Dustin said, “What are we supposed to do?”

Mike sighed, and then said, “We can find Will, and we can keep running.”

“What?” Lucas asked, looking up.

“We’ll find Will. We’ll break him out.” Mike said. “And then we’ll find somewhere safe. Somewhere far away. Where VFD can’t find us.”

“Can we do that?” Dustin asked, wide-eyed. “It took El her entire life to get out-”

“She didn’t have us.” Mike said, as he moved his hand to cover El’s.

“We don’t even know where he is .” Lucas said.

Mike jumped to his feet, and everyone else slowly stood, too. “We know he’s with VFD, probably the side El wasn’t on. And VFD is *everywhere*.”

“They’re not-”

Mike ran over to the trapdoor, which they’d shut earlier; the dust from the floor and couch had been kicked over towards it, but he knelt down and pushed it away, revealing the top of the trapdoor-which had the marking of the VFD eye.

“Wherever this place is, it was connected to the Library. And we were walking for at least a day.” Mike said. “Those tunnels are massive. El, do you know how far they go?”

El bit her lip nervously, but she eventually admitted, “Everywhere.”

“How are we supposed to find Will,” Dustin asked, “In the very narrow area of ‘everywhere?’”

“You said you were trained.” Mike said, turning to El. “Where was that?”

“Headquarters.” she said.

“Where’s that?”

She paused. “Changes.”

“We’ll find it.”

“Do you think we can?” Max asked carefully.

“What *else* can we do?” Mike said. “The police are corrupt and we can’t trust our own fucking parents. And we’re not just gonna *leave* Will there!”

They glanced to each other, and then Dustin said, “We’re gonna need supplies. Food, weapons, maybe we can find some rope; I think there might have been a basement door somewhere, and I saw some tools

in the hall closet.”

“We’ll gather everything we need.” Mike said, standing back up. “Dustin, you get what you just said. Max and I will raid the kitchen, see what supplies they have, maybe there’s some nonperishable foods. Lucas and El, you search upstairs... El?”

El was staring at him, looking very, very scared. Carefully, Mike said, “El, I know... I mean, we *won’t* make you break in with us. But you can help! And once we get Will, we’ll leave VFD forever. You’ll never have to see them again. We’ll be... free.”

El hesitated some more, glancing between them and the ground, and then she said, “I want to help. To help him escape. Like I did.”

“Okay.” Mike said. “Okay, then you and Lucas go upstairs and look for useful things. Let’s move out, meet back here when you’ve got everything you can find.”

Raiding the kitchen was a bit harder than they thought it would be. There were plenty of supplies under the sink, and several very strange foods in the fridge- honestly, who would leave a single pickle in a can and *nothing* else?

“Alright,” Mike said, as he pulled out some drain cleaner and placed it behind him, “I don’t think this sink works, I don’t see any pipes. There might be some kind of hidden compartment here, I’m gonna try and check.”

Max nodded, letting her hair fall over her shoulder as she glanced down at the bottom of the cabinet. “There doesn’t seem to be much food here,” she said, “But I found half a broom.”

“Take it. We’ll need all we can get.”

Max hesitated, feeling the wood in her hands as she pushed it next to her. Then, she said, as she dug through the back of the cabinet, looking for more stuff, “Do you think the non-arsonists are better than El thinks?”

“Huh?”

Max flinched. “Well, they seemed... nice enough, aside from the whole kidnapping thing. And they’re not firestarters. They probably would be... nicer than El’s family was.”

“Why do we care?” Mike asked, as Max pulled back with three loose screws in her hand.

Max dropped her items on the floor, before taking a deep breath and saying, “Mike, what if... what if we’re wrong?”

“What?”

Max glanced to him, trying to ignore how angry he sounded, saying, “If our parents... if our parents were okay with this, maybe it’s okay? Maybe we’re overreacting.”

“Overreacting to a kidnapping?”

“They said it was a recruitment thing. What if they’re right, what if we’re wrong, what if we’re just being stubborn?” Max asked, involuntarily remembering every time Neil would tell her to just leave him alone, every time Billy said she never listened to anyone, every time her Mom told her that she always knew better. They’d all said the same thing. She was just being stubborn.

“Stubborn?” Mike asked, narrowing his eyes.

And if her Dad was in on this whole thing, too...

“If our parents are in it, it can’t be... can’t be that bad. My Dad, Lucas’s parents, Ms. Byers, your Mom- well, they’re good people.”

“Well, maybe we’re wrong about that.” Mike muttered, glancing at the ground. “Maybe we’re wrong about them.”

Max flared up slightly at the implication that her Dad may not have been a good person, but... no, Mike probably didn’t meant that.

“If they wanted to hurt us, they had thirteen years to do it.”

“Not if they were waiting for those fuckers to tell them to let us get kidnapped.” Mike said sharply. “Not if they were *preparing* us for this.”

“If they spent that long preparing us,” Max said, her voice breaking slightly, “Maybe they had a good reason. Maybe *this* is what they wanted for us.”

“It doesn’t *matter* what our parents wanted!” Mike snapped, whipping around to glare at her. “None of the adults are going to help us! They’re not gonna help us find Will, they’re not gonna help us stay *safe*, and they’re sure as hell not going to protect us or El!”

Max glanced at the ground, knowing that he was right, but still not liking to hear it. Finally, she said, “They’re our parents.”

“Parents are supposed to keep us safe.” Mike said, slamming the sink door shut. “They definitely didn’t do that.”

Max stopped arguing there, instead just staring at the ground until Lucas and El got back downstairs.

26. El watches TV

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

El watches TV

They spent the night in that house.

The kids spent all day gathering useful materials, before dumping them in the Living Room and sorting. El felt herself very concerned at how many materials the others thought were useless- anything could be useful if you had the right situation, she knew. Why would they throw out the screws? She could do a ton of things with those.

They didn't have much, but it seemed to be a decent amount of items; anything that could function as a weapon was shoved into one of the Library Bags, while food was stored in another. Mike was going to put the half-spyglass in with the weapons, but eventually pocketed it, rationalizing that it seemed to be useless when split in half. They considered going in the tunnels again, but there was no telling where they'd end up, so they planned on going through the woods and finding a city, and tracking down some Volunteers from there; El seemed confident, when they asked her, that she could identify them. Max offered to pick the lock on the door so they could leave the house, but Mike said it'd be better to just break a window and climb through.

"And if it pisses off whoever owns this house," Mike said sharply, "Good."

They were planning to go out at night originally, so that they wouldn't be seen by anybody nearby, but once they realized that that meant that *they* couldn't see, either, they figured they should just go early in the morning.

"We'll switch watches again." Mike said. "Does anyone want to sleep in the bedroom?" Nobody wanted to split up, so they all fell silent. Finally, Mike said, "I'll take first watch. Whoever's up around sunrise,

remember to wake up the rest of us.”

Lucas opted to stay up, a book he may-or-may-not have stolen from the Library open on his lap and Mike’s notebook next to him on the floor. Max and Dustin both fell asleep on the carpet, having learned pretty quickly how to fall asleep on anything. El tried to sleep a bit, too, but eventually she wandered over to the TV and sat in front of it, turning it on and remaining fascinated by it for a long, long while. She’d only briefly seen flashes of television before, when she had to memorize codes with her sister, and she’d been forbidden from it after she disappeared. And these programs didn’t seem to have any hidden messages in them, just pretty pictures and strange stories.

“You like that?” Mike asked, sitting next to her as she managed to flip the channel to a soap opera.

El shrugged. “Pretty.” she eventually said.

Mike paused, glancing towards Lucas before he said, “El, if you... if you don’t want to help us break Will out, we can find someplace for you to hide. While we go in to get him. And we’ll meet you when we’re done, and hop on a train to another country or something...”

El shook her head softly. “I want to help.”

Mike bit his lip, before saying, “Well, uh, our plan’s just to find where he is and break in. I guess you could help us sneak around, yeah?” El smiled a bit, as Mike continued, “This won’t be easy, especially if he’s with a lot of adults. Hopefully we can find him alone and climb out a window. Maybe you could climb in and get him... though he probably wouldn’t go with you, might not believe you if you said you knew us. Maybe we could send Max up with you.”

El smiled a little, watching Mike plan. He looked so focused, staring into the air as he recited his ideas, trying to come up with an out for every eventuality. It kinda reminded her of when her and her sister used to sit up and quiz each other, but unlike them, he didn’t seem fearful, even though what they were about to do was very scary. He just seemed like he wanted to make things right, make things okay.

It really did surprise her that he would let her sit out if she wanted.

Her chaperones would *never* have done that. They made the final decision on everything, while El just had to do what she was told. It was pretty strange to be told she could stay out of something, she could stay safe if she wanted. It almost made her feel strong. To be able to choose to help. To choose to *fight*.

“Well, um...” Mike said softly. “I’m gonna try to get some sleep. You wanna stay up and watch with Lucas?”

El nodded, and Mike grinned, brushing his hand against hers before left, laying down next to Dustin and falling asleep within minutes. El kept her gaze on the TV, watching a commercial finish up. The new program started, and El felt herself grow confused. The two women kept using words she really didn’t know.

After another odd conversation, she called, “Lucas?”

It took a second, but Lucas came over, sitting next to her. “Yeah?”

El paused. “What’s a ‘date’?”

“What?”

El gestured to the TV. “They’re going on *dates*. With their *boy-friends*. It’s not... friend that’s a boy, right? It seems... different.”

Lucas paused, before stammering, “Um... uh, yeah? Boyfriends or Girlfriends or Partners or, um, it’s like... like a friend, but you *really* like them.”

“Really?”

“Like, um... romantically. And dates are when you go out and hang out places, but... romantically.”

“Romantically?”

“Listen, I’m not good at this, just ask Mike or Dustin when they wake up, they live for that crap.”

El considered, and then repeated, “What’s ‘romantically’?”

“Like... you want to kiss them and hold their hand and... live with them forever.”

“Kiss?”

“Damnit, just... I can’t do this.” Lucas sighed. “Sorry, I just...”

“Oh.” El said. After a second, she said, “So... hold hands? And be together?”

“Yeah, kinda. I mean, you can hold hands with normal friends, but this is special, I guess. It’s really hard to explain, sorry.”

El considered. “Could Mike be my boyfriend?”

Lucas jumped back, eyes widening. “What? I... I mean I *guess*, but you’d have to... ask him? I...”

“Are you Max’s boyfriend?”

Lucas stared at her for such a long time, El wondered if maybe he’d just broken. And then he said, “Wh-what? No! No, I... *no!*”

“Why ‘no’?”

“Because we’re... we’re just not!” Lucas sighed. “Look, I’m sorry, I’m *really* not good at this.”

El nodded slowly, before turning back to the TV. There was a bit of a silence, before she heard Lucas say, “My, uh... my sister likes this show.”

“Sister?”

Lucas nodded. “Yeah. I don’t know much about it, but I try to remember some parts so I know what she’s talking about. Like... I think that’s Marilyn? That blonde girl? Maybe.” They were silent for a second, watching the girl do her hair and talk about her new boyfriend, and then he said, “I wonder if she’s watching it right now.” El turned towards him, and he continued, “I mean, it’s late, but... maybe she’s still up. Maybe she’s watching. Or... or maybe those VFD fucks got her, too. I hope to *God* they didn’t, they only

seemed to get us, right? She wasn't in the car..."

Lucas curled up a bit, and he said, "I just... I miss her. And... and, *God* , I might never see her again..."

El put her hand over his, and leaned into his shoulder. She didn't know what she was supposed to say, she'd never been good with words. But that seemed to be good enough for Lucas, because he leaned in too and shut his eyes.

But after a second, the channel changed, and El tensed up.

"What is it?" Lucas asked, as El moved away and sat right in front of the screen.

The channel changed again, flicking every other second, probably to get her attention. Lucas didn't seem to notice, instead wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

After a few more flicks, subtitles flickered onto the TV. There was some button that was supposed to set subtitles on, but El knew she hadn't hit it.

The beginning of a movie started, with the caption *Production Code 2264* . El shut her eyes, remembering which code that was, before staring at the screen.

"El?" Lucas called, but she wasn't paying attention anymore.

The subtitles came on, of two adults talking about their son at school. But remembering the code, El managed to figure out the message before the channel flickered again.

Are you who I think you are?

"Yes." El whispered. She knew if the sender was controlling her TV, she wouldn't be able to hear her, she'd be at the station, at the controller, she'd learned that with... *No. No, don't hope for that, she's gone...*

But the channel flipped again, and El felt her breath catch in her throat.

This is K. This is K. This is K.

“El, are you okay?” Lucas asked, still not noticing the TV, obviously not able to figure out the codes.

The channel changed again, and Lucas jumped as he noticed. “Holy shit!” he said, staring at the film in horror. “That’s... that’s *Zombies in the Snow*! We watched that the night we got...”

El stared at the caption, panic filling her.

Danger! Take the Children.

The channel flipped one last time, and El dropped her expression to one of determination. If she was out there... if she was *alive*... she had to help her. She’d always talked about leaving. She could help *them*, too.

The caption came up.

Look for smoke tomorrow. I will be there.

“El?” Lucas asked.

El leaned forwards, shutting the TV off. Then, she turned to Lucas, and she realized that she was smiling. She was *smiling* and she felt... she felt brave again.

She didn’t know how to explain the message to him. He might not understand. He might not get it. The others might not think it was safe. But she could do it. She could *save* them.

“Vigenere.” El said, smiling.

“What?” Lucas said.

El pointed at Mike’s notebook, abandoned on the floor. “Vigenere. Cipher.”

Lucas’s eyes widened. “El, what just happened?” He asked, though his voice sounded almost ecstatic at this new information.

El smiled, and all she said was, “Sister.”

27. Nancy gets Namedropped (feat. Steve fucks up)

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Nancy gets Namedropped (feat. Steve fucks up)

“We’re about a day away.” Nancy told Jonathan, flipping her spyglass in her hands. “So in case we get into any trouble, you’re going to need to know how this works.”

They’d already discussed the plan that morning. Hopper and Jonathan were going to guard the exit with Steve, while Nancy and Joyce went in to break into the files. Jonathan wasn’t very happy about the arrangement, but Nancy wasn’t too sure he’d be able to fight his Mom on this one. Hopper wasn’t too happy either, but his argument with Joyce gave the two teenagers plenty of time to sneak off so Nancy could show him the spyglass settings in her room.

“So,” Nancy said, showing Jonathan as she moved the dials, “This is how you get the light to work. It serves minimal heat, too, if you need that.”

“Hmm.” Jonathan said, staring down at the half-spyglass he had in his hands. “Can I do that with this?”

“Uh, no, but you never know when you might find another half.” Nancy said. “And... and this setting is for codes, you see the numbers? Steve explained how that works, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Nancy paused, before saying, “You wanna come in with us, don’t you?”

“How’d you guess?” Jonathan said, staring at the ground.

“Look, I know you want to help find your brother. And the Cop wants to help find the kids.” Nancy said, glancing towards the door. “But neither of you are trained like we are. You wouldn’t last a minute,

okay?”

“I’m not useless,” Jonathan said, “I could-”

“Of course you’re not useless. If you were, I wouldn’t be showing you how to do all this shit.” Nancy shrugged. “And you won’t be useless, you and the Cop’ll be watching the door...” She paused as she realized that Jonathan was staring at her. She shifted uncomfortably, before saying, “What?”

“You’re showing me this stuff because you think I’m useful?”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. You’re not useless.” For some reason, this didn’t seem to comfort Jonathan. Nancy wasn’t quite sure what she did wrong, but she didn’t want Jonathan to look that disappointed.

“Oh, I...” Jonathan paused. “I mean, I... I guess that was the deal, right? Exchange of information and stuff.”

“Uh, yeah.” Nancy said. Was he upset because he didn’t *want* to be useful? God, she never had this much trouble talking to Steve or Tommy or Carol...

After another pause, Jonathan said, “Do you think they’re still fighting?”

“Probably. Your cop doesn’t seem to like being left behind.”

“Well, he left town behind to try and track down the kids.” Jonathan said. “I can see why he’d be upset.”

“Yeah.” Nancy muttered. Then, after a second, she said, “Um... do you wanna... do you wanna see how the transparency setting works?”

“I... uh, not really.” Jonathan admitted.

“Did I...” Nancy wanted to ask what she’d done wrong, but... she wasn’t *great* at admitting she’d fucked up. Admitting she’d fucked up was usually how she got punished in class. “Um...”

"I should probably go, before they realize I'm gone." Jonathan said, standing up.

"Wait!" Nancy said, jumping to her feet. "Wait, I could show you something else, or- or we could go over codes again!"

Jonathan paused, before shaking his head. "No, I should... I should go. I don't know why I even..."

"Even what?" Nancy asked, flaring up slightly. "Bothered to talk to us?"

"No!"

"Well, sorry I tried to help. Sorry I wanted to know anything about the kids we're trying to save!"

"Are you *actually* trying to save them?" Jonathan snapped, glaring at her. "Or are you trying to recruit us into your *fucking* cult?"

"It's not a goddamn cult!" Nancy said, almost reflexively.

"They recruited you by *kidnapping* you! They *kidnapped* my brother!" Jonathan yelled.

"*They kidnapped my brother!*" Nancy screamed, tossing her spyglass on the floor, not even flinching as it split in half. "It's not that fucking simple, Jonathan! We're working towards the greater good, towards dismantling the Volunteers, towards keeping the world's secrets and keeping ourselves *alive!*"

She stopped then, shutting her eyes and breathing hard, before daring to glance at Jonathan. He was staring at her, looking shocked.

Then, he said, "They have your brother?"

Fuck. Oh, fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

Nancy stumbled backwards a little, before nodding. "Yeah. Yeah, they... it doesn't matter. This doesn't *matter*, you shouldn't be questioning... we shouldn't be questioning this, we don't... we just burn. We burn shit and steal shit and that's what we *do*. We're not..."

I'm not..."

"Lydia..." Jonathan said, and when it took her a second to respond, he continued, "Your name... it's..." he paused, shutting his eyes, trying to form the words. Finally, he said, "Why... do you *really* want to know about the kids?"

Shit.

Slowly, Nancy leaned down, picking up the halves of the spyglass. Slowly, she put them together, staring down at them and wishing she could set them on fire with her eyes.

Jonathan looked from the spyglass to her, and then she looked up at him.

Normally, if she'd been found out, she would've kept up the lie. Made up some shit on the spot. Or just set fire to whoever had tracked her down, that would work, too.

But Jonathan was different. She didn't want to hurt him.

No, that wasn't it. That wasn't it... she... she *trusted* him.

Trust was a hard thing to come by in VFD. But Jonathan seemed to *care* about her, and Steve, and his Mom and brother, and all the kids. He described the kids in how they acted, how kind they were, how loyal, and not how useful.

She wondered how he'd describe her.

Hopefully it was better than how she'd describe herself.

So, slowly, Nancy said, "My name's Nancy Wheeler. I'm here for my baby brother."

"For the last *fucking* time, Hop!" Joyce said, running her hands through her hair as she paced, "You are not *trained* to break into a facility like this! They'll kill you before you can get to the second floor!"

"I'm not letting you go in alone again!" Hopper said. "Not when we need to find these kids!"

Steve sat in a chair against the wall, feeling more uncomfortable by the minute. He'd sat through fights between adults before, plenty of times- with his parents before his recruitment, with his teachers while they were mad at schedules, with his chaperones before they'd ditched them- but it was definitely trippy seeing it go on like this. He hadn't paid much mind to the adults before now, just thought of them as their transport from one place to another. But... they seemed really impatient to get their kids back. As far as he knew, his parents didn't give two shits about seeing him again.

"Look, can I just..." Steve said, but once again, they didn't hear him.

"I can *handle* it, Hop! I was a spy for *years*, and I still know how to do shit! I can get in and out before they-"

"They're spies, too, Joyce!"

"Yeah, and I know how they think!"

"I kinda want to go..." Steve muttered.

"Do you seriously think I'm gonna let you storm in there with a bunch of arsonist teens-"

"Hi, arsonist teen here!" Steve said, raising his hand. "And I wanna go, so if we're not gonna discuss battle plans, I'm just gonna go back to Nancy and play with fire. Cool?"

"No, Steve, I don't-" Joyce began, but then she paused, and her voice lowered a bit. "Who did you say you were going back to?"

"Nancy, my fri-" Steve froze, suddenly remembering. "Oh. Oh shit."

Both adults were very quiet, before staring at each other with wide eyes. Then, Hopper turned towards Steve and said, "Lydia's full name wouldn't happen to be Nancy *Wheeler*, would it?"

"Shit, I shouldn't have... I fucked up." Steve said.

"Nancy Wheeler's been missing for eleven years." Joyce said. "Her *brother* is one of the kids."

"She didn't want me to tell you..."

"I assumed VFD got her, but how the hell did she end up with the Firestarters?" Joyce asked.

"This is bad, this is bad, I'm so fucked." Steve said.

"She needs to come back to Hawkins." Hopper said. "Her parents-"

"*Fuck* no!" Steve interrupted, jumping up. "No, she doesn't want to go back-"

"I want to talk to her." Joyce said.

"Bad idea, bad idea, just... just pretend I didn't say anything." Steve said. "Pretend I didn't say anything and... and..."

He turned around, running his hands through his hair, trying to keep from panicking, and he glanced out the window and froze instantly.

"How long has that car been parked out there?"

Joyce rushed over, also looking out the window and following his gaze towards a long, black car, parked at the far end of the lot.

"Fuck." Joyce said.

Hopper looked too, and as soon as he deduced what was happening, he said, "Get the others. We have to go *now*."

"So you wanted to know about your brother?" Jonathan asked, as Nancy handed him the spyglass.

Nancy nodded. "I... I haven't seen him since he was a toddler, barely walking. I figured that those Volunteers might go after him someday but I didn't think it was likely, I mean, they left him behind while they grabbed me, right?"

She was rambling again. She did that when she was nervous, and the superiors didn't like that, they didn't like the idea that she might spill information by accident. It was a habit she'd tried desperately to break, but Jonathan didn't look very annoyed. He just looked a bit... concerned.

"You... you've been missing eleven years." Jonathan said carefully. "Nobody knew where you went."

"Well, guess my Mom did. The Volunteers said that she was in on it. Though I don't really think I believe them." Nancy shrugged. "But they never said anything about my brother..."

"Wait." Jonathan said, stepping back a bit and pocketing the spyglass before running his fingers through his hair. "Wait, the kids were kidnapped by Volunteers, right? Not Arsonists?"

"Not Arsonists." Nancy confirmed. "I would've known, and the telegram-"

"So how did *you* end up kidnapped by arsonists?"

"I *wasn't* kidnapped by arsonists." A small fire lit behind Nancy's eyes.

Jonathan paused. "You were with the Volunteers?"

"Yeah, and I ditched them to blow shit up!" Nancy said. "And I'm not going back, I'm *never* going back to them!"

"How did you-"

At that moment, the door opened, and Steve rushed in, yelling, "Nance, I *fucked up*!"

"What did you *do*?" Nancy whipped around, horrified.

"Okay, so, uh, first up, might've let something slip to the adults." Steve said. "But I need you to forgive me real fast because we need to get out of this hotel."

"Why?" Jonathan asked.

Steve jumped, surprised he was there, but he quickly said, “Uh, VFD car outside. Not sure if it’s our side or the other, but we need to get out.”

“What information did you spill?” Nancy asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Uh...” Steve said. “May have... let slip... your name...”

“You told them-”

“Run now.” Jonathan said, throwing a bag at Steve. “Argue later. Where’s my Mom and Hop?”

“Grabbing your stuff.”

“Then let’s go!”

But just as they left the room, they heard a window shatter.

They froze for an instant, and then Nancy said, “That’s from your Mom’s hotel room, isn’t it?”

Jonathan didn’t answer, instead taking off at a run.

Joyce screamed only once, and then she ducked to the ground and kicked, knocking the Volunteer’s legs out from under them.

They’d come in through the windows, like they always did, but Joyce didn’t have time to figure out whether or not they’d expected her and Hopper to still be in the room before one of them had sprung to action, grabbing her arms. But now she’d managed to wrestle free, and Hopper had managed to punch the other Volunteer across the face, kicking them into the wall.

Joyce scanned them quickly, trying to see if she could spot if they were Firestarters or Volunteers. But once they got to their feet, Joyce figured out pretty quickly that wasn’t very important.

The door opened, and Joyce grabbed a suitcase off the ground, tossing it at a surprised Jonathan, before yelling, “Go!”

Jonathan spun around and ran, reaching back to grab his mother's hand as they ran. Hopper slowly made it after them, staying in the back in case one of their attackers got too close; Joyce knew full well he wouldn't hesitate to fight them.

They passed Steve and Lydia- Nancy, sorry, *Nancy*- in the hall, and they spun, running after them, as Steve said, "Oh, we're going this way now? Okay."

"We're going to the car. We'll drive all night." Joyce said quickly. "If they're Volunteers, we have to get to base before them. If they're not, we want some distance between us."

They managed to get to the stairwell, and Jonathan held the door open for everyone to run through. They rushed down the stairs and out the door, rushing across the lobby, not even bothering to inform the woman at the desk that they were departing early.

Once they were out the door and outside, however, the sky darkening above them, they ran into a problem; that being, either the men who'd attacked them had made it outside, or they had friends, because someone jumped around the corner and grabbed Steve, who swiftly kicked them in the stomach and tossed them away very quickly, but as they all paused, to look, Jonathan felt someone grab his arm.

"No!" Nancy yelled, whipping around and grabbing the hand of the attacker and wrenching it away, as Joyce rushed over to grab her son.

And then everything happened in a flash, going way too fast to process. Just as Nancy broke away, the attacker reached forwards, grabbing her ponytail and dragging her back. Nancy screeched, reached into her pocket and whipped out a pocketknife, slinging it around to try and break the hand away, maybe even cut it off. The Volunteer moved their hand back, and the knife sliced across Nancy's ponytail, effectively chopping it off. Barely reacting, Nancy turned and kicked, flipping the knife in her hand and landing in an attacking position, looking like she was ready to charge and stab. However, as the Volunteer managed to scramble up, Nancy instead whipped around, knocking the one who'd attacked Steve back again,

brandishing the knife as a threat. The second he was far enough away, she turned to the others, who had paused to watch her, and took off running towards the car.

After a second, the rest of their group followed.

Joyce hopped in the driver's seat, while the teenagers rushed into the back and shoved the suitcases and bags at their feet, not even bothering to open the trunk. Hopper watched the two Volunteers for a second, but they seemed to be heading for their own car, probably to chase them.

"I can avoid them." Joyce said quickly, as she started the car and hit the gas. "Just hold on and trust me."

They drove off, then, still incredibly nervous and jumpy at every shadow across the road.

It was several minutes before Jonathan turned to Nancy, biting his lip and managing to say, "Your... your hair."

Nancy reached up, fingering her strands of hair, which had been cut to shoulder-length. She hesitated for a second, and then shrugged.

"Been meaning to chop it off anyway."

28. Setting Fires to get Attention

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Setting Fires to get Attention

“We should head out now.” Mike said, bouncing his knee as he sat on the couch.

They’d all cleaned up a bit more in the washroom one more time, though they still didn’t have new clothing. After going through their supplies one more time, they’d glanced out the window to see it was getting a lot brighter than they’d intended.

“I’m going to go through the hall closet one more time, in case there’s anything we missed.” Mike said. “Can someone go through the bedroom one more time?”

“I’ll go.” Max said quietly, sounding a little distant.

“Alright. El, you wanna come with me, or...?”

El nodded, jumping up. She seemed very energetic recently, very excited about something. So she ran off with Mike, and Max wandered off, leaving Dustin with Lucas, who was sitting in the corner with his books open. After a second, he let out a groan and buried his head in his hands.

“What’s up, bud?” Dustin asked, moving and sitting beside him.

“I’ve figured out which cipher she’s using,” Lucas said, “But I can’t exactly crack it.”

“How’s that?”

“She’s using the vigenere cipher, which is a substitution cipher- you know?”

“I’m vaguely aware of it.” Dustin said. “But I know you need a

codeword for it.”

“Which I don’t have,” Lucas said, “And I can guarantee that El’s not gonna give it to me.”

“Do you have a chart?”

Lucas nodded, showing a piece of paper. “Ripped it from the back of the notebook. But I’ve tried a bunch of different codewords- ‘El’, ‘Arsonist’, ‘Snicket’-”

“Why ‘Snicket’?”

“You know, the song. She wrote out the whole thing, it has to be important, right? I’ve tried some keywords for that, but-”

“Did you try ‘VFD’?”

Lucas paused. “What?”

Dustin flipped back a few pages in Mike’s notebook, showing the scribbles of *VFD*, over and over.

Lucas slapped his forehead. “Goddamnit! I should’ve-”

“Well, when was the last time you slept?” Dustin asked, grinning a little as he picked up the table. “You’re not thinking straight.”

“None of us can think straight.”

“Damn right.”

Dustin wrote *VFD* across the table and said, “Alright, then, let’s decrypt as much as we can before the others get back.”

He opened the notebook to the first paragraph, staring down at the gibberish.

*D fp Zq, L vr d Kmrzsls. N dh f Scthina vsg nt zvx pt xlnyhm. Gxo xkz'x
jjsh, hd vdgodsjn fuz lrij, dii L'h xwdqo cjuz. N'p js wcj Idwh-Nydmylil
vdih jk wcj Yjqxiyhzw Idwh Yjsvwwhjgo. Txm rlnxljs ln yr fjhk ykz brmqg
Lzlzy. Epy L cfwz nw. D mdoj lo. N kvyh wzuinqb. N kvyh yfqxnqb*

ykmtxbm wcj idwh vsg gjdqnb fvcjv ds pt bdfj. L cfwz sro ghdsj vgoz yr gjdms zcfw D bdiy, kvalil wj rhhtudeh kfynbrmiv vsg yt zcfw D'r wjqg. Vsg D mdoj wcj sztsgj zct wjtn hd vdxwzw imtp hj. L cfwz ykz uhjuoz bkj bri'y vzy pz kuzj.

“Well, let’s get started.”

“Okay, so that was *not* a secret compartment,” Mike said, groaning as the bump on the wall turned out to be just that. “I really don’t think we can use the spiderwebs for anything, so I guess we should just head back, huh?”

El shrugged, scanning the room for more items they could possibly use. She leaned against the wall, brushing a strand of hair out of her face, while Mike kept watching her. Finally, he said, “Actually, uh, can I ask you something?”

When she nodded, Mike pulled the half-spyglass out of his pocket. “This was in the safe, remember?” he said. “It’s, like, half of yours?”

El stared at it for a second, and then pulled her spyglass out. She held it in front of her, and then split it in half. Mike jumped and gasped, but, unfazed, El simply put it back together. Mike stared, and then said, “So... where’s the other half of this?”

“Burnt.” she shrugged, guessing.

“Oh.” Mike said. “I... But then, what do I do with this?”

“Keep it.” El said. “We can find another half.”

“Wait, so it could fit into another half of a spyglass? Like, any other half?”

El nodded and split her spyglass in half again. She put half of hers away, and then held it out. Slowly, Mike leaned forwards, and pushed his half into hers. It clicked and spun a bit, and then they were both holding a whole spyglass.

“Whoa.” Mike said, a little surprised.

El smiled slightly, before pulling her half of the spyglass and splitting it again.

“Do all spyglasses do that?” Mike asked.

El nodded.

“Um, El...” Mike said, pocketing the spyglass. “While we’re here, I... I wanted to ask...” She watched him carefully, and he finally said, “Once we get Will, we’re probably gonna keep running. Maybe get out of the country... I just... I wanted to know if you want to still come with us. I mean... we’re leaving everything behind. Everything. And we don’t know what we’re doing and...”

He stopped for a second, shutting his eyes, and then he said, “You don’t have to come with us. You can go anywhere you want, you can do *anything*, I just...”

He jumped when he felt El slip her hand into his. He opened his eyes, and saw that she was smiling slightly. “I want to stay with you.” she said softly. “You’re my friends.”

“...oh.” Mike said, not able to hold back a relieved smile. He loved being around her, he loved seeing her excitement around new things. And he was glad she liked being around them.

El glanced towards the door, and then looked back at Mike, dropping her smile slightly. Then, she said, “Jane.”

“Jane?” Mike asked.

El smiled, and then pointed to herself. “I’m Jane.”

Mike froze, shocked. And then he smiled, and said, “Jane. That’s...” it took him a second to even think of the right word to say, and he finally settled on, “Pretty.”

El beamed back at him. “Pretty.”

They’d only translated a bit by the time Mike and El came back, with

Mike saying something about how they hadn't found anything else useful. Max came down later, holding the pajamas left in the drawers.

"In case we need more clothes." she said, dumping the clothes into a bag. "I can't sew, but maybe we could figure out how to make them easier to wear."

"Okay, then." Mike said carefully. "Let's head out. Who wants to break the window?"

"Dibs!" Max yelled, as Lucas and Dustin slowly slid the notebook and translation pages into their pockets, and Dustin hastily shoved the library book into his own bag.

Max rushed over towards a chair, lifted it, and tossed it at the window. It shattered, and she moved over, using her shoe to hit at the edges of glass that remained, so they could get through more safely. By the time she was done, they'd all managed to pack everything else up and slid outside.

"Where do we start walking?" Lucas asked quietly.

Mike paused, before saying, "There's a path on the other side of the house. Let's follow that, we'll eventually get somewhere."

"I mean, every path leads somewhere." Dustin shrugged. "Let's head out and see where we go."

El skipped at the front of the group, always the first to peer around a tree or pick a fork in the road. The others kept carefully watching her, trying to see if she'd do something off.

"She seemed really excited by something on TV." Lucas admitted eventually, when she was too far away to hear them. "Last night. Something about sisters? But she wouldn't tell me anything."

They were silent for a second, before Mike said, "Do you think they'll go after Holly?"

"VFD?" Max asked. When Mike nodded, Max said, "Don't see why

not. Might wait a few years though, since they waited eleven years to pick you up.”

It felt a bit weird to all of them, to talk about their situation so casually, but they didn’t have a lot of time to cry, and all the stuff that had happened over the past week had sort-of numbed them to things like this.

“Do you think Erica’s possible?” Lucas asked.

“Well, they grabbed you from Mike’s house, maybe so long as Erica and Holly don’t have any sleepovers.” Dustin said.

“Well,” Lucas said bitterly, “If my parents are in on this, it won’t matter who she sleeps over with, will it?”

They fell quiet again, and then Dustin said, “I don’t think my Mom knows. I think my Dad... well, I think he was part of it.”

“I can’t see my Dad in on it.” Mike admitted, glancing away slightly. “He’s not... he wouldn’t be too into the whole ‘spying’ thing. My Mom, I don’t... I mean, I could... I think she’s probably more likely. I don’t know.”

“I think my whole family’s in on it.” Max said, shoving her hands into her pockets. “Even my Dad. I just... ugh. It’s too weird. Too... creepy.”

After another pause, Lucas said, “I... I didn’t think my parents would... but now that I think about it... they do go on a lot of trips... maybe *they’re* kidnapping kids, too. Kidnapping them for whatever these fuckers want them for.”

“I don’t think they’re all kidnappers.” Mike said carefully. “El’s been trained in spy stuff, and VFD seems to be pretty similar to the arsonists, but with less fire. So, uh, they’re probably... spies? Which isn’t much *better*, but...”

“Do you think they really got permission to kidnap us?” Dustin asked. “I mean, they lied about a lot.”

“El said-”

“They could have lied to El.”

“I don’t think so.” Max sighed. “It makes... it makes *sense* , which is the worst fucking part.”

They fell silent after that, and didn’t speak until nightfall.

“We’re almost to a town. See the smoke?” Mike said, gesturing forwards. “Looks like factory smoke.”

It had just fallen into night, and they’d all considered stopping to sleep, but Mike was right; the smoke looked close.

“Are you sure?” Lucas said, narrowing his eyes. “We’ve never seen factory smoke, that looks more like the time James lit a tree on fire at camp.”

“I don’t see why anyone would light a tree on fire.” Mike said, though he hesitated. They all glanced at each other, each very nervous about exactly *who* would light something in fire so near to a VFD base. The only one who didn’t look worried was El, who was bouncing on her feet.

“Here’s an idea.” Lucas said. “I’ll go ahead with someone, we’ll see what’s going on.”

“I can use the binoculars we found in the storage closet,” Max suggested. “I’ll go.”

“Don’t go too far.” Dustin said. “And if it’s... anything interesting, you tell us first before you do anything stupid.”

Lucas paused, and then pulled Mike’s notebook out of his jacket pocket, passing it to Dustin. El eyed it cautiously, as Lucas said, “Something for you to do while you’re waiting for us.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Max asked, as they got closer to the smoke, becoming very convinced that, indeed, there wasn’t a

town ahead, and something very big was on fire.

“No.” Lucas admitted. “But it’s better than all of us walking up to it to see. Even if it’s something really dangerous, we’re the only ones here.”

“Fair.” Max said, fingering the binoculars as they walked. After a second, she said, “God, I miss my skateboard.”

“That’s what you’re thinking about right now?”

“I could get us there way faster.” Max said. “Plus, I miss getting to skate. I can’t even drive now.”

“You couldn’t drive before.”

“Well, not legally, but whenever I found an unlocked car back home-”

“This is starting to get worrying, Max.”

“This is- oh, shit.”

Up ahead, the path forked, with one road leading away from the main trail and narrowing. Slowly, the two kids peered around it, seeing that the trees started to mellow out, leaving a fence at the end, the smoke emerging from a house behind there.

“Fuck!” Lucas yelled, and Max whipped out the binoculars, staring ahead.

Over the fence was a pretty fancy house, where a fire had started on the top floor. The kids moved a bit closer, finding a box in front of the fence to stand on. Max peered through the binoculars to look into the windows, trying to see if anyone was still inside.

“We have to go.” Lucas said nervously. “This has got to be VFD, we have to go...”

“We have to do something.” she said, lowering the binoculars.

Lucas whipped around, staring at her in horror. “*What ?*”

“There might be people still in there.” Max said. “Even if they’re arsonists, we could probably figure out what they’re doing. If we got a weapon-”

“We’re not going to *fight* them!”

“We can’t just keep *running*! And if they know where Will is-”

“Why would an arsonist know where-”

Suddenly, someone grabbed onto Max’s shoulder, placing their other hand on Lucas’s, and the kids both froze.

“Are you the runaway kids?” asked a nervous-sounding female voice.

Lucas and Max glanced at each other, silently communicating in the few seconds of silence they allowed themselves. And then Max ducked as Lucas whipped around, kicking her across the stomach. The second the woman jumped back, Max grabbed Lucas’s hand and dragged him down the path. After only a few steps, though, someone else jumped out, grabbing their shoulders and dragging them back. Max screamed, starting to kick wildly, trying to push herself away, as Lucas also started yelling and struggling.

“We’re not gonna hurt you! Calm down!” said the man, only barely heard over Max and Lucas’s screams.

Suddenly, the man doubled back, releasing the kids, and Max and Lucas looked around, seeing Dustin had run up behind him, hitting him with a broom handle.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Lucas asked.

Mike ran up, too, rushing out of the trees and grabbing Lucas’s hand, trying to push him back. As they started to run off, he glanced back. “El ran off towards here. Where is she?”

“We didn’t see her!” Max said.

“You didn’t-”

El suddenly raced past them, out of the trees, and towards the two

people in front of the house. The kids froze for a second, glanced to each other, and then ran after her.

“El!” Mike yelled. “El, stop!”

El slid to a stop in front of the woman, and scanned her, eyes narrowing. “Where’s Kali?” she asked, almost yelling. “*Where’s Kali?*”

“El! Come back!” Mike yelled.

Max managed to run to El first, grabbing her arm to drag her back.

“Kal’s coming, she’s getting out from the back.” the woman said, as the man ran back, grabbing Dustin and Mike by the arms.

“Let go!” Mike yelled, starting to try and wrestle himself away. “El! We have to go! They’re trying to-”

“*Jane!*”

They all froze, as a teenage girl rushed out from behind the fence corner, staring right at El, her mouth opening in shock.

There was a tense silence, and then El yelled, “*Kali!*” and rushed forwards, throwing herself at the girl and clinging to her. The girl froze for a second, and then cheered, hugging her back and laughing.

“Oh my *God*, Jane! I didn’t think it would work! We managed to track your tunnel movements to this general area but I didn’t know if you’d turn the TV on-”

“You’re alive!” El said, pulling away and beaming. “You’re alive! And the codes worked!”

“Yeah, Mick helped be hack into the broadcast- which reminds me, Dottie and Axel are in the car, we need to head out.”

“Head out?”

“We have a safe place, for you and-” the girl paused, staring ahead.

Mike, Lucas, Dustin and Max had all frozen, staring in horror at the

girl. Max and Lucas were close to the woman, as if they'd been preparing to fight her again, while Dustin and Mike had stopped fighting the man in shock.

"El... who is this?" Max asked carefully.

El glanced between them, and then burst into a grin. "My *sister*. Kali."

29. In which VFD sucks a lot

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

In which VFD sucks a lot

They drove for a little bit, before Hopper finally said, “So... Nancy Wheeler, huh?”

Nancy sighed, shooting Steve a quick glare, before saying, “I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Well, it sounds important.” Hopper said. “Seeing as you’ve been missing from *our town* for over a decade.”

“This is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you.” Nancy sighed, curling up a little. “I don’t wanna answer dumb questions or talk about the fucking Volunteers who recruited me. Can we just... get the kids back and *then* figure out what to do with them?”

Joyce glanced at her sympathetically, and then said, “Alright.”

Nancy and Hopper both jumped. “Joyce-” Hopper began.

“I get it.” Joyce said, a little louder. “I get it, I don’t like talking about my education, either.”

“Good.” Nancy said, glaring down at the ground.

They fell silent again, and then Joyce said to Hopper, “When we get to Headquarters, Nancy and I’ll go in. Steve will wait in the tunnels for us, and you and Jonathan will wait on the other side.”

“I want to go in.” Hopper and Jonathan both said.

“For fuck’s sake.” Joyce groaned. “*None* of you are trained! You’ll be caught far too soon. Just wait on the other side and make sure nobody goes in after us, and we’ll be out in a few minutes. *Lord.*”

“Joyce-”

“I am *aware* how dangerous it is, Hop!” Joyce said. “I’ve *been there*, and I am *fully aware* of everything that could happen! *You* are not, so just *trust me* on this!” They fell quiet, and then she said, “We’ll be out in a few minutes. Just trust us.”

It was still dark when they arrived at Headquarters; a nicely-built building smack in the middle of nowhere. Steve paused outside the tunnel with Hopper and Jonathan for a second, as Nancy and Joyce started down.

“So, um...” Steve said carefully, glancing between the others, “I know you’re, um... Jonathan, I know you’re looking for your brother, but uh...”

He glanced at Hopper, and the Chief sighed and said, “You wanna know why I’m here?”

“Well, I mean, it’s your job, right?”

“I wanna make sure Will and his friends are alright.” Hopper said. “They’re good kids.”

Steve nodded and paused, and then said, “Uh, you got a family? In Hawkins? That you left?”

Hopper glared at him and shook his head.

“Oh. Okay. I, uh... my parents haven’t seen me since I was, like, ten. It was right before they ran off on a mission and I guess it didn’t go well because they haven’t talked to me since.” He sighed, and then said, “Well, guess I better follow them. You guys stay out here, and... yeah, have fun, I guess.”

Joyce and Nancy got in pretty easily, sneaking in through the tunnel in the kitchen and moving to the stairwell. It was a bit hard to see, but their eyes adjusted to the darkness very quickly; that was a perk

of being a Volunteer, Nancy guessed. There were a lot of things they had to do in the dark.

“The files on neophytes should be on the third floor.” Joyce said, as they started to climb up.

“Sounds about right.” Nancy muttered, playing with her now-short hair. “At least from what I remember.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“As a little girl. Not for a while.” Nancy admitted.

Joyce paused, as they turned to the next set of stairs, and then she said, “Why are you with the Firestarters?”

“None of your business.”

“I just-”

“I don’t care.” Nancy snapped. “Don’t care why you care. Let’s just get our information on where Will is, find him, and then round up my friends to get the others. We don’t need to be friendly to do that.”

They reached the third floor, and Nancy held the door open for Joyce, before shutting it quietly. They didn’t know how many people were there, so they had to be as quiet as possible.

Joyce led the way to one room, opening it silently and letting Nancy in. The teenager ran to a filing cabinet, picking the lock quickly and opening it, sifting through papers. Joyce followed suite, and they worked in silence for a long while, trying to find something, *anything*.

Finally, Nancy opened the right cabinet, flipping open a file and seeing a picture of Lucas paperclipped to a short file. The photo looked a little blurry, probably taken while he was leaving school and nobody was watching. That gave Nancy a creepy feeling in her chest. Carefully, she skimmed the words written on his page.

Specialty: Slingshot Proficiency, possibly other long-range weapons. Parents: Mainly Inactive. Siblings: Under Watch. Recruit for Weapons

Accuracy and as a way to regain previous involvement.

She didn't feel like reading the full paper, and the last sentence scared her a little, but she did find that the important part was hastily handwritten at the bottom.

UNKNOWN LOCATION, LAST SEEN IN SHERWOOD.

Nancy flipped to the next page, seeing Dustin. He looked a bit younger than when she'd encountered him, and the photo seemed to be cut out from a newspaper page; he was holding what looked like a Science Fair award.

Specialty: Science, presumably Biology or Herpetology. Parents: Inactive Father, Non-Volunteer Mother. Siblings: None. Recruit for Science Division.

UNKNOWN LOCATION, LAST SEEN IN SHERWOOD.

Flipping that, next was Max. She looked very angry in the photo, and someone behind her was brushing her hair; the photo must have been taken through a window.

Specialty: Vehicular Proficiency, possibly a future Taxi Driver. Parents: Active Father, Inactive Mother, FIRESTARTER Stepfather. Siblings: FIRESTARTER Stepbrother. Recruit for Vehicular Training and to keep her from the Other Side.

UNKNOWN LOCATION, LAST SEEN IN SHERWOOD. KEEP EYES ON STEPBROTHER.

Nancy bit her lip and flipped again, seeing Will. She paused, staring at him; he was the only one she hadn't seen, and he looked quite a lot like Joyce and Jonathan, which she guessed made sense. The photo was of him at a park bench, drawing on a notepad. Nancy squinted, seeing what she thought was Jonathan in the background, photographing something in the trees, but she couldn't quite tell; it was still very dark in the room.

Specialty: Art. Parents: FIRESTARTER Father, Inactive(?) Mother. Siblings: Under Watch. Recruit for Art Talents and to keep him from the Other Side.

Apprenticed to M and G, underneath the Mortmain Mountains.

Nancy finally turned around, saying, “Joyce, found it.”

Joyce rushed over, and Nancy handed Will’s paper over. Joyce read it, her eyes narrowing and widening at different points, until she finally said, “Jesus. Mortmain? Really? Well, we’ll start there, if M and G are who I think they are, they shouldn’t be hard to bypass. Unless, of course...”

Nancy stopped listening then. Because she looked down at the final paper, and she suddenly felt very, very cold.

Mike’s photo had been taken at a distance, while he was sitting outside what was probably a store, playing with a younger girl, maybe two or three. Nancy stared at both children, but the girl... was she... did they have a sister?

Specialty: Writing. Parents: Non-Volunteer Father, Active Mother. Siblings: Unknown Location and Under Watch. Recruit to...

No. No, no, no, *no* .

Suddenly, a light flickered on in the hallway.

“Nance, we have to go.” Joyce whispered, putting Will’s paper back and reaching to grab the file from her, but Nancy reeled back, almost stumbling into a filing cabinet. “Nancy?”

Nancy stared at her in horror, before looking back down at the paper. She didn’t skim this time, she read every word, as fast as she could, taking it all in. She was wrong, she was wrong, she *had* to be wrong...

But it was right there. It was written, right above the Unknown Location message.

“Nancy, what’s wrong?”

Nancy slowly pushed the file into her jacket, almost numbly. And then, softly, she said, “It’s *my* fault.”

“What?” Joyce said, and then the door flew open.

“Oh no.” Jonathan said.

Up ahead in the building, a light had flickered on in a room on the first floor, shining out of the windows. Then another room lit up, and another, and another.

“They’re still inside.” Hopper said, and then he knelt down, opening the trapdoor to the tunnel entrance.

Jonathan was about to protest, to remind him that Joyce said to *stay there* , but... they were still inside. They were still there and they were going to get caught.

So instead, he jumped in after the police Chief, and they ran to find Steve.

Joyce moved fast, rushing forwards and knocking the Volunteer into the wall. Then she ran back, grabbing Nancy’s hand and dragging the shell-shocked girl along down a hall, and past two more surprised adults. They turned a bend, and Joyce said, “They’ll spread the alarm *fast*. We need to make it to a window and climb out, the stairwell will be compromised. You can climb, right?”

Nancy didn’t respond, her chest still feeling heavy. She was starting to struggle breathing, her eyes moving a mile a minute as she scanned every hallway they turned to.

Unfortunately, just as they reached a room with windows, the lights went up, and Nancy felt herself wrenched away from Joyce, two Volunteers grabbing the adult ahead of her. Joyce yelled and tried to throw them off, but one of them managed to shove her into the wall.

Nancy suddenly felt a cold fury building in her, looking at these Volunteers try to hold back Joyce, hold her back from trying to save her *son* . And a fury for all they did to her, and for what she’d just read.

A fire was building inside of her, and she wanted nothing more than to let things *burn* .

“What are you *doing* here?” a Volunteer asked Joyce, and Nancy couldn’t tell whether or not he recognized her.

“What do you think, you son of a bitch?” Joyce spat.

That was when Nancy spoke.

“A *replacement*?”

The room felt cold again, as everyone turned to stare at her, and Nancy met the eyes of each Volunteer in turn, letting them see the anger building inside of her.

“You were going to leave him alone, because he didn’t care for spywork, and Mom said he was too social. But you gave up on me. So you grabbed him.”

Recruit to replace his sibling, a failed apprentice.

She didn’t dare look at Joyce, didn’t dare wonder what she was feeling, tried hard not to think about how she *must* blame her now, that it’s all her fault.

A Volunteer narrowed his eyes at her, and he said, “Who are you?”

The door suddenly burst open, and they looked up in shock to see Steve and Hopper rush in, Jonathan close behind them. Nancy thought she heard some Volunteers yelling from the hall down, yelling to grab the intruders and stop them.

“*What are you-*” Joyce began.

But the distraction was welcome. Nancy ducked and kicked and pushed, knocking the Volunteer holding her away. And then, as fast as she could, she reached into her pocket, whipping out a match, and lighting it.

All eyes were drawn to her. And then, stone-faced, she threw the match, setting a nearby pile of books aflame.

30. Kali adopts Five Children

CHAPTER THIRTY

Kali adopts Five Children

“Your sister’s an Arsonist?” Lucas asked in disbelief.

Kali made a face at that. “I prefer the term ‘runaway.’” she said. “I’m not with the VFD anymore. But smoke is the best way to get attention, we can destroy one of *their* Headquarters, and as a bonus, our method of destruction diverts blame away from us.” She glanced at the man. “Funshine, you can let them go now. You won’t run again, will you?”

Mike and Dustin glanced to each other, and then Mike turned to El. “Can we trust her?”

El nodded fervently, and slowly, Mike and Dustin nodded, too. Funshine released their arms, and then the woman said, “You put up quite a fight, nice job. How long have you kids been on the run?”

The kids glanced to each other, trying to count the days. “A week? Maybe?” Max said. “But that’s not important... El, your sister escaped?”

“I thought...” El paused, looking at Kali. “I thought you were gone.”

“I ran. When thieves girl broke into our facility.” Kali said. “But I’ve been trying to find you forever. Why are they calling you El?”

“That’s her name.” Lucas said.

Kali got a weird smile on her face, and then she said, “Jane, did you name yourself after-”

“Yes.” El interrupted, looking a bit embarrassed.

“Oh, Brenner would *hate* that.” Kali laughed. “Which is great. Come

on, we have a large van you all can fit in, you can tell me everything.”

“Are you...” Lucas said, and as she glanced to him, he said, “Are you going to take us to VFD?”

“I *told* you, I’m not with them.” Kali said, her face darkening. “Trust me. As long as you’re with me, you’re safe.”

The kids glanced to each other, before Mike said, “Better than sleeping in the woods.”

“You were all kidnapped together?” Kali asked.

Mick, the woman they’d kicked in the stomach, was driving the van, with a man with a mohawk- Axel- sitting beside her. The kids had been seated in the back of the van, with Kali, Funshine and a new girl named Dottie with them. As they drove down the bumpy road, El had moved to sit closer to her sister, grabbing onto her arm. Max was leaning on Lucas, while Dustin and Mike huddled together in the corner.

“Yes.” Mike answered. “With another boy, Will Byers.”

Kali jumped at the name, but then said, “Yes, he’s still with the Firefighters, last we heard. Mick, can we track his location?”

“We could *try* , but we’d need to get to a Headquarters and break in.” Mick said.

“Ooh, that might be difficult.” Kali shrugged. “I mean, we’ve never been able to successfully do that. But maybe we’ll get lucky. We’re Phoenix kids, right, Jane?”

El giggled.

“So,” Dustin asked carefully, “Your real name’s Jane?”

El hesitantly nodded. “But... if you want to call me El, it’s... fine.”

“And... you’re her sister?” Dustin asked, turning to Kali.

Kali nodded. “I guess we should have a proper introduction. I’m Kali Prasad. These are my friends- Axel, Mick, Funshine and Dottie.”

“And you’re not with VFD?” Lucas asked cautiously.

“Oh, fuck no.” Axel said, and the rest of the group said similar things.

“Well, uh, I’m Dustin. Dustin Henderson.” Dustin said carefully.

The other kids glanced at each other, and Max said, “Max Mayfield.”

“Lucas Sinclair.”

Mike took a second longer, still looking between the group with a vague distrust, before he said, “Mike Wheeler.”

A flicker of recognition showed in Kali’s eyes, and she said, “Oh, you’re Nancy’s brother.”

Mike jumped. “Nancy? That’s my sister? You know her? Is she okay, is she here, can I talk to her?”

Kali watched him sadly, before saying, “She and her friend are away on a mission for us right now, but they should catch up soon. Don’t worry about it. She really wants to meet you.”

Mike looked surprised. “Really?” She nodded, and Mike smiled slightly.

“Where are we going?” Max asked carefully.

“Our hideout.” Kali said. “But we won’t get there til morning, right, Mick?” Mick nodded, and Kali continued, “How long have you been walking?”

“All day.” Dustin said.

“You should get some sleep, then.” Kali said. “You can tell me the rest in the morning, don’t want you tired out.”

“We don’t...” Mike said.

"It's alright." El said quickly, standing up and going over to sit by him and Dustin. "They're safe."

Mike stared at her for a second, and then said, "Okay, uh, I'll take first watch-"

"You don't have to do that." Kali said gently.

"Oh, uh, right. We'll just... do that then."

After a second, Max stood up, standing in front of Kali and staring her in the eyes. "If you're lying to us," she said, as darkly as she could, "I'll kill you."

Kali didn't react visibly, but she said, "Understood."

Everyone but Lucas had fallen asleep by the time Mick pulled up to the hideout. He glanced out the window, seeing that they'd pulled into the edge of town, parking in front of a broken-looking house.

"Is it safe?" Lucas asked quietly, as Kali bent down to pick up El.

"Yes. It only looks bad." Dottie assured him. "Nobody's died for at least a week."

Lucas looked worried, while the others laughed. That... *was* a joke, right?

"We can carry your friends in. You go ahead." Kali said. "Our guest room is upstairs, second room."

"No, no, I wanna..." Lucas said hesitantly.

Kali sighed. "I get that you don't trust me. That's alright. You can walk in with us, then."

Lucas stared at her for a second, shocked, before saying, "Alright. Alright, let's go."

When they woke up in the morning, they all sat around, staring at each other in silence for a bit. There was only one bed, where El was asleep, but Max and Mike had been able to share a sofa in the corner, and Dustin had been placed on a chair. Lucas had fallen asleep on the rug on the floor.

Finally, Mike turned to El, saying, "You're sure we can trust her?"

El nodded. "Sister."

"Do you..." Max hesitated, before finally saying, "Do you really think we're safe? We're *actually* safe?"

"Of course not." Lucas said. "We still need to find Will."

"But... we can trust *someone*." Max said. "That has to count for something."

They all looked to each other again, and then the door opened. Kali glanced in and said, "Alright, we stole some breakfast for you all. Want some answers? Or coffee?"

"We don't drink coffee." Mike said.

"Well, you should." Kali said, which caused El to giggle for some reason. "Come on down. I'm sure you have a lot of questions."

31. Nancy's Tragic Backstory

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Nancy's Tragic Backstory

They'd managed to get out of the building unscathed, with the files on Will still in Nancy's jacket pocket. Joyce drove them out. With the exception of Steve, none of them looked at Nancy. She didn't seem bothered, instead curling up and glaring at nothing.

But she *was* bothered. She could deal with Joyce and Hopper being mad at her, she'd never cared much for adults. But Jonathan wouldn't even meet her eye. And she knew why, she knew why they were so mad at her...

Instead of going to a hotel, they decided to switch drivers and drive all night. But when they stopped at the next gas station- early in the morning- Nancy jumped out, going to take another smoke break.

Of course, only a few minutes after she'd settled in on the side of the store, Jonathan and Steve came over. And only a minute after the tense silence that followed, Joyce and Hopper came, too.

"What?" Nancy asked darkly. "Is this an intervention?"

"Nancy, we just want to talk for a second." Hopper said.

"Oh, sure." Nancy rolled her eyes. "Go ahead, I get it. It's my fucking fault, you guys wanna ditch me."

"What?" Jonathan said quietly, sharing a confused look with his Mom.

"I get it, I've been ditched before." Nancy said darkly. "And you guys are right. If Mike was my replacement, this is all because of me. So I'll hitch a ride with someone and get back to Sherwood, should be able to figure out where my friends went from there."

There was a pause, and then Joyce said, "Honey, we're not upset about that."

Nancy paused, lowering the cigarette slightly. "What?"

"We're a bit more upset about the fact you burned down a building." Jonathan said. "You couldn't have known... we don't blame you for this, Nance."

Nancy turned towards them, confused. "You..."

"Also," Steve spoke up, "Do you seriously think I'd let them ditch you? Or that *I'd* ditch you?"

It took Nancy a second to pull herself together, and then she turned around, facing away from them so she couldn't let a reaction slip. "Oh."

After a second, Hopper said, "But, yeah, about the Headquarters-"

"It's what we do." Nancy said softly. "We're arsonists. You should've known that by now."

She glanced at Steve, and he nodded, before adding, "Yeah. That was probably one of our better fires, too-"

"There were people in that building." Jonathan said sharply, causing Nancy to jump.

"Yeah, but they were part of the Volunteers." Steve retorted. "So they're a bunch of assholes."

"And we got what we need." Nancy said. "We know where Will is, or at least where he was most recently. And those fucking Volunteers aren't gonna have him anymore."

She paused for a second, raising her cigarette again, and then Jonathan asked, "Why are you with them?"

"Huh?"

"The Firestarters." Jonathan asked. "Why would you join them?"

Steve gave him a look, shaking his head, plainly trying to tell him to *shut up* .

But surprising everyone, even herself, Nancy just lowered the cigarette and said, "Because the Volunteers are worse than we are."

Jonathan and Hopper both stared at her, confused, while Steve shut his eyes and leaned against the wall. Joyce, however, looked a lot more resigned. She was just watching Nancy as if she was waiting to hear something she'd heard a million times, something she dreaded.

Nancy sighed, and said, "You guys already know I was recruited when I was six." She sighed, coughing slightly. "Six. Six fucking years old. I was brushing doll hair and playing dress-up with the girl from across the street. And then one night I was shoved into a car and before I knew it, I was learning codes and climbing walls and shooting arrows at targets until I got too many splinters to keep going."

Joyce nodded quietly, while Steve glanced away. Jonathan and Hopper kept staring. Why did they have to keep *staring*?

"I was the good one. The good child. I did what I was told, first because I was scared, but then because I got attached. To the teachers, to the building, to the society. I was still scared, of course, who wouldn't be? There's arsonists outside the doors and... angry teachers in the next room. But if you do what you're told, nobody gets upset at you. Nobody hurts you if you behave.

"And I was so special and good," Nancy rolled her eyes, "That when our current headquarters were found out, instead of transferring me with the rest of the kids, I got a chaperone all to myself. They sent me off to a guy in the city. He wasn't weapons proficient, like me, but he was an investigative journalist. Something I was kind of interested in. I thought that maybe they were paying attention to my interests, but, no, I found out later that they just wanted me to keep an eye on him.

"He was too investigative. VFD relies on finding answers, but only the answers they want. He wanted to know why we did what we did, what effect recruitment had on young children, what things the

higher-ups were keeping from us, what was in the fucking Sugar Bowl. And they thought that since I was the good little girl, the one who always did what the teachers wanted and turned in her assignments, that I would tell them if he said something bad. What they didn't expect was that I was so into it. I was into the investigation, I wanted to know *everything*. We ran off every day to break into museums and libraries and find out what was really happening *everywhere*, and Murray just kept saying-

"Oh my God." Joyce suddenly said, jumping a second. Nancy turned towards her, narrowing her eyes slightly. Everyone glanced her way, too and then Joyce said, "Was this *Murray*? Murray Bauman?"

Nancy paused, and then nodded.

"Good God..."

"You know him?" Jonathan asked.

"A lot of... a lot of Volunteers knew each other." Joyce simply said. "Shared some classes."

Nancy paused, considering Joyce for a second. And then, she continued, "Well, I was with him for a few years. But when I was... ten or eleven? Yeah, ten, I think. We were digging too deep into shit they didn't want us to. Murray found out some lab was set on fire and he didn't think it was the arsonists, thought the culprit was framed. I thought so, too, he showed me the evidence, I helped him with the fucking conspiracy board..."

She sighed, before flicking the cigarette to the ground, watching it roll across the pavement. "And his bosses found out. The superiors of the Volunteers. They sent some people to come visit, to tell him to stop digging into useless things and get back to exposing higher-up arsonists like he was supposed to. Told me to tell them if he went back to it, and that if things went south, my apprenticeship would be over. I was scared, but I kept listening to Murray. Maybe if I hadn't..."

Nancy shut her eyes, then, feeling the memory flooding back to her. "It was a few weeks later, we'd broken into a higher-up's office and

stolen some files. Probably shouldn't have, but, you know... we had to know. And Murray thought he'd found evidence, but then the Volunteers came in again. They yelled at him, at us, for the longest time. They tried to take me away, but I was screaming and kicking. And Murray started threatening to spill secrets. He had *loads* of blackmail material. On almost everyone."

"They didn't take that well, did they?" Joyce asked numbly.

Nancy nodded. "They pulled me behind them and..."

God, she could still *hear* it, hear the screaming and the yelling and she could feel the hand gripping her wrist, feel her tears streaming down her face. And she could feel the *heat*.

"And... and they set a fire. To cover their tracks."

She glanced at Steve. He was the only one who'd heard this story before, pretty soon after her switch, when he'd found her crying in the dorms. He was watching her carefully, with a sympathetic look. It was a look she didn't get often, not from either side. She stared at him as she finished.

"Soon as the house was on fire, and they tried to drag me out, I knew I couldn't go with them. I couldn't stay with them. The arsonists might be bad, sure, but they were upfront about it. So I kicked them in the shins and *ran*. I knew I couldn't go to any adults, VFD was everywhere. The police force, the government, the bank, my goddamn family. I wandered around town for a bit, still covered in ash and dirt. And some Firestarters showed up. Wanted to see who'd lit the building. They told me that if I told them everything, they'd let me stay with them. And I..."

She stopped, choking herself off. It just hit her right then, it hit her how *awful* that sounded, that adults had seen a lost ten year old, traumatized and filthy, and told her that they'd *bargain* with her. That they'd teach her how to light things on fire, that they'd hide her and let the Volunteers think that Nancy Wheeler was still lost, that she could get to give up her favorite books and hobbies. That she could drop her commonplace book on the ground and light it up. To prove that she was one of them.

“Oh my God.” she said softly. Then, she said, “We’re in a *cult*.”

She expected Steve to deny this, to shake his head and remind her that they were working for the greater good. But he just watched her, and his sympathetic look dropped to a tired one. He’d figured it out right along with her.

Nancy didn’t realize she was crying for a few seconds. And then, slowly, she moved over to Jonathan and threw her arms around him, burying her head in his shoulder. She didn’t know why. She didn’t know why she went to him and not Steve, who was her closest friend, or Joyce, who could relate more than her son could.

But she hugged Jonathan, and he froze for a second, and then hugged her back.

And when she was done crying, she pulled back and said, “That never happened.”

Jonathan and Steve nodded, while the adults just glanced at each other, a bit confused. Nancy slowly turned to Joyce, and then said, “When... when we get your kid back... where are you gonna go?”

“I’m not sure. But we’ll go somewhere safe. I promise.”

“I... would you mind too much if I came with?”

Joyce shook her head, smiling slightly. “Of course not.”

Nancy turned to Steve, brushing a strand of hair out of her face, and said, “You don’t have to come-”

“How many times are you gonna say that?” Steve asked. “Nance, you’re right. Kali was right, The Byers were right, even the Cop was right.”

“I have a name.”

“Shut it. The point is, we’re in a fucking cult. And we’re gonna get those kids out, and find Kal and her pals, and all run away in a giant-ass group. Safety in numbers.”

“Your parents-” Nancy began.

“*Fuck* them.” Steve said, smiling slightly, a little relieved that he finally said it. “Fuck it! We’re runaways! We’re runaways and we’re gonna rescue a bunch of kids we don’t know!”

“We’re gonna rescue my brother!” Nancy said, reaching out her hand for Steve. “*And* a bunch of other kids!”

And then they laughed together, and suddenly, for the first time in a while, Nancy felt a little bit safe.

32. Kali hosts a Q&A

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Kali hosts a Q&A

“Dottie and Mick went into town,” Kali explained, walking over to grab something from a counter as everyone settled down on the rug, not even bothering to go into the kitchen. “But they’ll be back soon, hopefully with food. You remember Axel and Funshine?”

Mike glanced up at the two men, who were sitting a bit farther away and playing cards. He gripped El’s hand, though he noticed Dustin wave jovially at Kali’s friends, forcing a smile onto his face. “Hey!” he called, as Lucas and Max shot him a glare, “Sorry I hit you with a broom!”

Funshine shrugged. “You kids were scared, we get it. Dottie bit Axe first time we found her.”

“Yeah, and Steve tried to set us on fire.” Axel rolled his eyes.

“Steve?” El asked.

“You could call him an ally.” Kali said walking back in with a tray of coffee cups and placing it in the middle of the circle the kids had made on the floor, before sitting on the other side of El. “This should be good before breakfast gets here.”

“We don’t drink coffee.” Lucas reminded her hesitantly, though Max didn’t have a problem with immediately reaching forwards and grabbing a cup.

“We’re a bit young for that.” Mike explained carefully.

“Well, you’re a bit young to be on the run,” Kali shrugged, “But here we are.” She paused, looking at the kids as they slowly reached forwards to grab cups, before saying, “How much do you know?”

“You were in a society called VFD.” Mike said. “You get your members by kidnapping kids like us. El was kidnapped as a baby and trained to do everything. Our families are all in on this. There was a schism, so some of the VFD people start fires. They communicate through code a lot. They have these-” he pulled the half-spyglass from his pocket- “Except I’ve only got half. My sister’s in it, but apparently with you now? They’ve got secret tunnels and a book with secrets, but we haven’t been able to get through it because it’s a trigger for El and unnerving for us. And... that’s about it.”

Kali considered. “That’s quite a bit more than I expected.” she looked towards El, a small smile on her face. “Did you tell them anything?”

“Not much.” El admitted.

“She wrote us some stuff,” Lucas said, “But we’re still translating it.”

Kali nodded, as if this was to be expected. “Alright, so, do you want me to fill in the gaps?”

They all nodded quickly.

“Okay, for starters,” Kali said, “VFD stands for *Volunteer Fire Department*.”

The Hawkins kids all felt some kind of relief when she said those words. Relief that they were getting information, relief that they were about to learn more about the organization that had thrown their lives off-track, and relief that their questions were about to be answered.

El, meanwhile, squeezed Mike’s hand, shutting her eyes. Mike squeezed back, silently letting her know that he was here for her.

“They started a long time ago, but grew increasingly more cultish every year.” Kali said. “It was founded to keep information safe, at first, but slowly morphed to keep secrets, to *make* secrets, to keep the world quiet. The Schism began due to disagreements in how we spend our money and treat Volunteers who’d like not to have their homes burned. But it worsened a while ago, a little before I was born, due to some shit going down. I’m not clear on the details, but it had

to do with a bad review, an opera house, and a theft.”

El perked up a bit at this, and Max said, “So, the schism is... arsonists and librarians?”

“Mainly, though sometimes librarians can burn things and arsonists can quote a book at you.” Kali shrugged. “The Schism complicated a lot. Nobody could trust anyone, could tell who was on whose side. So information, traditions, information on a certain... *bowl* ... all that, started to get lost. Unfortunately, it also meant that regulation was down, too, so the cult status started to grow, with the ones in charge stooping to lower and lower measures to get recruits and keep them.”

“And you were a recruit?” Lucas asked.

Kali nodded. “I’ve got a tattoo, like Jane, but I don’t like showing it off.”

The kids nodded, understanding quickly.

“I was abducted when I was about five.” Kali said. “While Jane was taken at birth.”

“At birth?” Max asked.

Kali paused. “Well, it was... complicated. I can’t pretend I know much, but I do know that her Mother was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Wrong place?” El asked, squeezing Mike’s hand hard and looking at Kali with curiosity. She hadn’t heard this before.

Kali looked a little sadly at her. “Your Mother was a Volunteer. She was sent to infiltrate Firestarter bases and got discovered. Went into labor, didn’t make it out with you. And, well, they decided to use you for...”

“For what?” Mike asked, as El paled and Kali trailed off, starting to look angry.

“The Phoenix Program.”

“Phoenix Program?” Dustin asked.

Kali sighed. “The Firestarters were losing a lot of ground after some book or another got published, and started a new training program, for kids from exceptionally capable families. They decided that instead of waiting for us to develop a speciality on our own, they’d train us from infancy to have *all* of them. Become the ultimate weapons. We have reason to believe the Volunteers don’t have the program, though if someone gave them the idea I doubt they’d say no.

“Not a lot of us survived the program. I escaped fairly young, but unfortunately had to leave Jane. But I always planned to go back for you, I just... couldn’t find you. I was scared that you’d gotten yourself killed-”

“It’s okay.” El said softly.

Kali paused for a second, staring at her, before continuing. “Well, I found people to stay with, but... but that didn’t last long. I ran into Axel a few weeks after that, he was on the run from the Firestarters, too.”

“Bunch of assholes.” Axel piped up.

“We ended up banding together with other runaways we picked up along the way.” Kali said. “I knew I couldn’t get away from VFD for long, so we turned to helping destroy their headquarters, driving them further underground. The less power they have, the more likely it is we’ll be safe.”

“Destroying their headquarters?” Max asked carefully.

“Burning them.” Kali said. “They’ll blame the arsonists, and not pay attention to us. It’s that or keep running and hoping they don’t get us.”

“In this life,” Axel added, turning to look at the kids, “It’s roll over or fight back.”

“We’re all fighters here.” Kali said.

“We’re fighters!” Max said, a little too quickly. “We’re fighters, all of us.”

“Well, I guess that’s good.” Kali smiled slightly. “Because you’ll have to do a lot of fighting if you wanna keep up with us. Starting with when Mick and Dottie get back; our plan is to head to a HQ and figure out where the Byers kid is, but first we’re gonna try to contact Nancy and Steve; they were already sent to a Firestarter Headquarters, they might have news, and it’s better for us if we don’t try to get into a Volunteer-infested place.”

“Wha- what’s my sister doing at a Firestarter Headquarters?” Mike asked, jumping.

“Let’s just say she’s an inside girl.” Kali said carefully. “More importantly, we’re going to have to give you kids some basic training, otherwise you won’t stand a chance against the VFD. Jane, what have you shown them?”

El paused, having been taking a sip of her coffee. She considered, and then said, “They know codes.”

“Some codes.” Lucas interrupted.

“We know Morse.” Mike said.

“And some simple substitution ciphers.” Dustin said. “And we know, uh, how to *do* vigenere. Not like we could do it in our heads or anything, but who could-”

“Oh, that’s something Jane and I learned to do when I was eight.” Kali said. Dustin turned a little red, and she quickly added, “You know, Volunteer Training. Not like you had any...”

“And,” El said, “Max can climb.”

“Oh, you’re a climber?” Kali asked.

“I kinda freaked the f out.” Max admitted. “I can climb up and down buildings fine, but not at all like El can.”

“Hmm.” Kali considered. “Would you... would you mind if I asked

you a few questions? They might... upset you."

The kids glanced at each other, and then Lucas said, "Depends. Can we ask something first?"

Kali narrowed her eyes. "Depends."

"Is... is it true?" Lucas asked. "Did our parents let them take us?"

Kali stared at them for a long time, and then she glanced towards El and said, "I'm not sure. My parents didn't want the Firestarters to have me, and Jane's Mom definitely didn't consent to her recruitment. But... Volunteer families always send their kids in. If Mike's sister was recruited, then he's probably got a family."

"My stepbrother's in it." Max said softly.

"And my Dad." Dustin said.

"Then you're probably in one, too." Kali said. "More likely than not, you came from a heavily VFD-occupied city, if you were all in the same place." She noticed their faces fall, and slowly seemed to realize that this wasn't what they'd wanted to hear. "Look, I'm... I'm sorry, that's the way it is."

"We... we kinda figured..." Mike began, biting his lip and staring hard at the ground. El slowly gripped his hand a bit tighter.

"Now, I'd like to ask," Kali said carefully, "If VFD wanted you, it's because you had something they valued. Are there any... talents you all have?"

"I can skateboard." Max said. "And drive."

"You can drive?" Kali raised an eyebrow.

"My Dad showed me." Max said. "I'm good at moving anything with wheels, really."

"So Vehicle Proficiency." Kali said.

"I... I'm pretty good at science, I guess." Dustin said. "And Will's

really good at art, like, *super* good.”

“I can shoot anything.” Lucas said. “With a slingshot. I’ve used my Dad’s gun a couple times, too, and I’m pretty good with that.”

“I can get you a slingshot.” Funshine said, making the kids jump; they’d forgotten that the men were playing cards behind them.

“I can help train you in that, too.” Kali said. “Or Jane can, she was *very* good at range weapons.” El brightened at the compliment, as Kali turned to Mike. “What about you?”

“I... I dunno.” Mike said, shrinking a little. “I’m not good at much.”

“He’s nice.” El piped up.

“*Nice* doesn’t make for a good Volunteer.” Kali said. “But I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“Why do you need to know this?” Lucas asked.

“Need to know how best to train you.” Kali said, staring into the distance. Mike vaguely recognized the look; she was clearly thinking a mile a minute. “You’re all going to need to learn basic self-defence, I can take that- Axel, can you help, too?”

Axel glared at her. “You want me to hang out with *kids* all day?”

“What? Scared I’ll beat your ass?” Max asked, and Lucas’s eyes widened as he reached to grip her arm, shaking his head wildly.

“What’d you say?” Axel narrowed his eyes.

“Funshine!” Kali interrupted quickly. “Think you could show them some basic fighting?”

“Think so.” Funshine said.

“And Mick can definitely help with codes.” Kali said. “Dottie can get you some *great* disguise training, she’s a pro at that. We can train you on the road to Headquarters, there should be one nearby.”

"I don't know about traveling long distance with ten people to keep track of." Axel said.

"It's just a simple recon mission." Kali said, though she considered for a second. "I guess we could leave them during the initial heist and pick them up before taking them to a safe place, though I feel like you'd all like to break in-"

"We would." the kids said.

"But anyway, after we get information," Kali said, "We'll have to check in with an ally and then-"

"And then we'll find Will?" Lucas asked.

Kali nodded.

"And then what?" Max asked.

"Yeah," Dustin added, "What do we do then?"

At that moment, the door opened, and Mick and Dottie rushed in. "Kal, you gotta see this!" Mick said.

"What?" Kali looked up. "Did you get-"

"Yeah, yeah, we got food." Dottie said. "But we got a *telegram*."

The kids jumped, and Kali said, "What?"

"Yeah. Post Office left it out, since it was written in code they didn't know who to give it to. We managed to swipe it before they called the cops." Dottie said.

"Sure it's for us?" Kali asked, as Mick handed it to her.

"Well, it's from Robin, so it better be."

"Robin?" El asked.

"Another inside girl." Kali explained, scanning the telegram.

Max peered over her shoulder, narrowing her eyes. "That looks like

gibberish.”

“It’s an Atbash cipher.” Kali informed her. After a second, she handed it back to Mick and said, “Well, that’s fucked.”

“What is?” Mike asked.

“News on our... situation.” Kali said, turning towards Axel and Funshine, who had grown alert. “Robin’s got info on Nancy. She was spotted burning down an HQ, meaning she probably has information on Will already, which means a change of plans is required. Our best hope is to find her, that way we don’t have to deal with getting in and out of a Volunteer base. We should head in her general direction; she’s not far.”

“Uh, Kal...” Mick said. “Did you see...”

“Mick,” Kali turned towards her. “Can you give the kids some basic coding? The rest of us will pack up to leave in the morning, and I can take over once we’re in the vans.”

Mick paused, seemed to pick up on something, and then said, “Yeah. Alright, uh, I’ve got some books and stuff upstairs. You all want to come...?”

They hesitantly stood up to follow. El paused, gesturing for Mike to go ahead, and slowly, he released her hand and followed his friends. El moved over towards Kali, looking up at her carefully.

“I missed you.” she finally said.

“I missed you, too.” Kali smiled, patting El on the shoulder. “And don’t worry. Brenner can’t get to you now- none of them can. I’ll protect you.”

El smiled at her, and then rushed off after the others.

The second she was gone, Kali turned to the others, crumpling the telegram in her hands. “Alright, we have a problem.”

“What problem?” Axel asked.

“Is it about them?” Funshine gestured towards the place the kids disappeared from.

“Maybe.”

“Are they in trouble?” Funshine asked.

“We’re all in trouble.” Dottie sighed.

Kali glanced at each of her associates in turn, still mulling over the news Robin had attached to the end of her telegram, the warning she’d sent out.

“Nancy was spotted with someone.” she said.

“Steve?”

“*Obviously* Steve was there.” Kali rolled her eyes. “Someone *else*.”

Silence fell, as they stared at her, waiting for more.

And, finally, she admitted it.

“Joyce Byers is active again.”

33. Some nice, normal schooling

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Some nice, normal schooling

“You’re not doing too bad, Byers.”

Will glanced up from his notebook, shrugging at M. “Well, uh, it’s pretty easy.”

She’d assigned him to several codes, asking him to write the opening to *The Iliad* in each. And he was almost done, only about ten minutes after he started. He had to admit, codes were actually pretty fun.

“Yeah, makes sense you’d pick up codes easily.” M smirked.

Will didn’t ask what she meant by that, opting instead to continue his work.

“Uh, that reminds me.” M said, sitting across the table from him. “I have to ask something from you.”

Will bit back a *you’ve done nothing but ask things from me* and replied, “What?”

“We’re afraid your friends are still a little lost. We’d like to bring them back to the organization for training, you know?”

They’re still out. Will thought, struggling not to burst into a grin. *They’re still running. They’re still safe.*

“We would just like to know if there’s anything you could tell us. To help us find them.”

“Like what?”

“Like... anywhere they might go. Anything they might do.”

Will paused. "I... I don't know."

"Come on." M said, her voice lowering slightly. "You should be able to help us with this."

That was a threat, and Will knew it. M might not hit him, like other chaperones might, but he had a strong feeling that pissing her off was a bad idea.

He considered for a second. Could he say something to... throw them off?

"Max always liked the beach." he said. "And Dustin likes Chicago. Though... well, Mike would probably take them to his Aunt, if they aren't going straight to Hawkins."

That was a straight-up lie. Mike hated his Aunt, not that M would know. And he could claim plausible deniability if she accused him later.

"That was very helpful." M said. "Thank you, Will. Now, back to translating."

Will held back a smile as he kept writing.

Even if my family isn't trustworthy, my friends are.

And they're still safe.

"You said you're good with a wrist rocket?"

Kali had pulled Lucas out of coding, which Mick had spent all day teaching them. She held open the door for him, and Lucas glanced out to see a small backyard, with an enclosed area in the corner that was probably supposed to be a garden, and three targets set up in the back.

"Yeah," he said carefully, scanning the environment, just in case someone was going to leap out of the grass. "Yeah, why?"

Kali smirked slightly as she pulled a wrist rocket out of her jacket pocket and tossed it towards him. Lucas caught it, eyes lighting up as soon as his hands closed around it. It was a good size for him, and there seemed to be some kind of design etched on the side. "Where'd you get this?" he asked.

"We've got a weapons supply." Kali shrugged. "Quite a lot of stuff in there."

"Does it work?" Lucas asked, though as he said it, he realized he wasn't sure how a wrist rocket could *not* work.

In response, Kali took it back, loaded a rock onto it, and shot it at the target. Though it was pretty far away, Lucas could clearly see the rock hit dead center before bouncing to the ground.

"Whoa." he said, a little impressed, as she handed the wrist-rocket back.

"It works." Kali simply said. "Wanna show me how you shoot?"

Lucas paused, fidgeting with the rubber bands. "What?"

"Show me how you shoot."

Lucas pulled the band back a few times, trying to get used to the new weapon. He stepped forwards, picking a rock up from the ground, and attempted to shoot it, only managing to send it a few feet. "Shit, sorry." he said, feeling a bit embarrassed. "It's not... not really the same as the one I have at home."

"Not a problem." Kali said. "What's different?"

"The elastic is a bit... easier to pull?" Lucas guessed. "And it's a bit bigger than I'm used to, but not by much."

"Focus on that, then." Kali said. "Pull it back slower to make sure you have the right distance, and remember to take the size of the rocket into account."

Lucas paused and nodded, picking up another rock and pulling it back, stepping back slightly and glancing between the three targets.

He finally selected the one on the left, and shot.

To his surprise, he hit the center.

Slowly, Lucas picked up another rock, shooting it at the target on the right. Center. He shot for the center target- three out of three. He reached down, picking up a handful of tiny rocks from below the deck, and shoved them into his pocket, picking one up and shooting. He kept shooting, kept hitting center.

By the time he was done, the ground around the targets was littered with stones. Lucas lowered the wrist rocket, a small smile on his face.

“Have you been training long?” Kali asked, and Lucas jumped. He’d forgotten she was there.

“Uh, training?”

Kali flinched, before correcting herself. “I mean, with the rocket.”

“Oh. Since I was little.” Lucas said. “Stole it from my Dad’s stuff one day and he caught me and taught me how to use it properly. It’s... fun.” He trailed off, staring down at it. Then, he said, “Maybe he was training me. To be a VFD shooter or something. Do they have shooters?”

“Most Volunteers are trained in range weapons, yes.” Kali said. “But I’m not sure what their specific job is. They may have just trained you for weapons proficiency, like Nancy, so you could go into missions where you have to fight your way out.”

“I’m not great at other weapons, just range.” Lucas said.

“I don’t think VFD has snipers...” Kali trailed off, thinking.

Lucas glanced back at the rocket, and said, “If... if my Dad was training me for this, and he really was a part of it.... oh, fucking hell...”

He moved back to the deck, sitting on the stairs and staring off into space. “What is it?” Kali asked, a bit confused.

"I just... how much of my life is a lie?" Lucas asked. "How long have my parents been... preparing me for this? For this fucking cult? How long did they know VFD wanted me, wanted *us* ? Did they actually..."

He gripped harder onto the wrist rocket, trying to slow his breathing to calm himself down. Kali just sat beside him quietly for a moment, and then said, "I can't answer any of that for you."

"I know."

"But my parents were Volunteers, too. If I hadn't been recruited by the Firestarters, I'd have ended up on the other side." she snorted. "*Volunteers*. How many of them actually said the code phrase intentionally? How many of them knew what they were doing? How many of them *actually* volunteered?"

"I didn't." Lucas said. "I never wanted... I want to be an engineer. I don't wanna be a *spy* or a *Volunteer* or whatever... shit, am I gonna be on the run forever? I won't be able to afford college on my own..."

"How do you feel?" Kali asked.

"What?"

"Right now. How do you feel?"

Lucas considered for only a few seconds, before he admitted, "Pissed off."

"Good. You should be." Kali said, and when Lucas looked at her, surprised, she said, "You should be pissed off. VFD stole your life, stole all of our lives, asking us for blind obedience in return. And it's bullshit."

"Yeah." Lucas nodded. "Bullshit."

After a second, Kali said, "Wanna try shooting rocks again?"

Lucas picked up a rock and, without standing up, loaded it in the rocket and hit a bullseye again. He paused, and then said, "This seems like a good way to burn off some anger, huh?"

“Oh, definitely.”

Lucas smiled slightly. “Hey, Kali?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, M?”

Will flinched as she turned towards him. G had gone out to study the side of the mountain, leaving them alone. Will didn't like being left alone with someone he still barely knew, but... well, it was better than being left alone with G. He... wasn't quite as fond of apprentices as M seemed to be. And M would actually talk to him.

“Yes, Byers?” she asked, looking up from her book.

Will sat across from her at the table, glancing away towards the ground, not wanting to look her in the eye. “Uh, I had a question. Is it a question you're allowed to answer?”

“Well,” M said, shutting her book for a second, “That depends on what you're about to ask.”

“I... I wanna know about my Mom.”

M narrowed her eyes. “I'm not allowed to answer that.”

“I... I don't really wanna ask why.” Will said quickly. “I don't wanna know. I just... she was with the organization, right?”

“Of course.”

“So... what... what was she like?”

“Like?”

“As a Volunteer.”

M paused, considering. Then, she said, “Well, your Mother's a

codebreaker. Great at translating and creating hidden messages.”

“Like G?”

“Yeah.” M said. “She ever show you her coding?”

“She taught me and Jonathan morse code.” Will admitted. After a second, he asked, “Why isn’t Jonathan part of this?”

“That’s a long story.” M said, which meant she wasn’t going to answer.

Will bit his lip, and then said, “When can I talk to them again?”

M was silent for just a second too long, just enough to clue Will in. “We’ll see. Now, get some sleep. We’re going climbing again tomorrow.”

“Ugh, *why*?”

“You need to be able to climb. By the time we’re done, you’ll be able to scale a ninety-degree angle in heels.”

“Why would I need to do *that*?”

“You’d be surprised.”

Will stood up, giving her an odd look, and then jumped when he heard the door open. He glanced towards the direction of the sound, and then rushed out of the kitchen, racing to get to his room. Once there, he shut his door and slid to the floor.

He probably shouldn’t have run like that. G wasn’t *that* bad. He wasn’t as bad as some of the other chaperones had been. But... he did give Will a bad feeling. He was pretty good at sensing things about people, and G definitely wasn’t a great person.

Slowly, he moved to his dresser, pulling out the handheld radio. He paused, wondering if he could risk sending out a call now... no, not until G and M were asleep. What if they used their own radio while he was on the channel? That wouldn’t end well.

And his talk with M hadn't revealed what he'd wanted to know. He'd wanted to see if his Mom had actually let them take him. Because if she was involved in all of this, she'd hidden it very well. To the point of drilling him on how *not* to get kidnapped for as long as he could remember. He had a feeling that someone who was alright with the recruitment process wouldn't have done that.

Then, Will got an idea.

M might not talk to *him* about his family. But she might mention their conversation to someone else.

After hiding the radio again, Will crept out of his room, momentarily thankful that the twin chaperones had given him proper lessons on sneaking around old houses. They'd warned him multiple times not to use that training to escape, and as much as he'd wanted to, he hadn't wanted to risk getting lost in the woods without any supplies.

But, well, he just had to hope he was actually good at eavesdropping. He and Max had managed to listen in on a couple of parent-teacher conferences, and he really hoped that the adults hadn't just been pretending not to notice them.

He sat outside the door of the kitchen, and he could indeed hear M and G talking, in tones so hushed he had to strain to hear.

"Slow down." M was saying. "Slow down, you're saying she did *what?*"

"Burned down Headquarters. Our superiors said we have to bring the boy somewhere else, as soon as possible. She might be trying to find him, we have to keep on the move."

Oh, God, were they talking about...

"Why would she be trying to find him? She should know he's a new recruit."

"You *know* we haven't talked to her since... well, we probably should've seen this coming."

They had to be talking about her. Will struggled not to cheer to

himself, curling up a bit, trying to listen to make sure that, yes, they were actually saying just what he wanted to hear.

“So we’re going to have to move him again? You know we can’t move until the flowers bloom on Wednesday, and we can’t transfer him until another chaperone is free.”

“We’ll move out Wednesday night, then.”

“Goddamnit, I was just getting used to the place. And so was the kid.”

“Who gives a shit if he was getting used to it? He’s going to have to be a better Volunteer than *she* ever was.”

Holy shit, *holy shit*. He was right. *He was right!* They had to be talking about his Mom. They *had* to be. She hadn’t let them take him, and she was *looking for him*.

“And you said... you said she burned down Headquarters?” M asked carefully.

Will paused for a second, narrowing his eyes.

“Well, in a way.”

“Damnit, G, you can’t just say *that* !”

“Well... she apparently has a group she’s traveling with. But we shouldn’t kid ourselves-”

“G...” M said softly. “You don’t think she... made an alliance with her husband, did you?”

Will froze completely.

“How are we supposed to know? We lost almost all news of her the second she left him. She could have. I’m sure *he’d* love to burn our headquarters any chance he got.”

She wouldn’t. She wouldn’t, any time she’d talked about his Father, she’d been either angry or terrified. Jonathan didn’t remember him

very fondly, either.

And then Will's heart sank, as he suddenly realized what they were actually saying.

My Dad's in VFD.

And he's an arsonist.

Slowly, he stood, making certain he didn't make any noise, listening for a second as the adults kept talking about where they'd be moving to, and how they'd have to have everything packed up for Wednesday night. Carefully, he moved back to his room, shut the door again, and sat on his bed, staring up at the ceiling.

His Mom had until Wednesday, at most, to get to him. To find him. And God only knew how far away she was now.

But he knew one thing. He knew she wasn't going to stop looking for him. And he knew that she *hadn't* let them take him. He *had* been kidnapped, not "recruited." And, for better or worse, she would find him eventually. And then they'd go *home*.

He waited about an hour, just thinking over what he'd just heard. And then, once he realized the house had become very dark and M and G had already gone to their beds, he pulled out the radio.

"If I go, there will be trouble..."

"If I stay, it will be double..."

34. Kali Goes on a Field Trip

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Kali Goes on a Field Trip

The Party slept in the hideout again that night. They'd gone over codes with Mick all day, and then went over some self-defense stuff with Kali and Funshine. They seemed to have that down alright, though El was obviously the best at it. (Mike was probably the worst, but nobody was rude enough to bring that up.)

"We're only teaching you enough to get by," Kali told them, as she made sure they were comfortable enough in their room; she brought in an extra mattress for Lucas. "We're not gonna force you into full VFD training. But we want you to be able to detect a Volunteer or a Firestarter, and survive an encounter."

The kids all nodded.

"And for tomorrow..." Kali paused. "Uh, we have some extra clothes in the room next to yours, in the basket by the wall. You can pick anything that'll fit you."

The Party glanced towards each other; they'd been wearing the same clothes all week, sure, but... they were the only things they had from home.

"Thanks, Kali." Max finally said.

"And once we have a good read on where your friend might be," Kali said, "We'll go after him."

"What about VFD?" El asked, a bit worriedly. "They won't... like that."

Kali paused, before saying, "We have a way to keep them off our backs. Just rest for now, and I'll wake you up when we need you tomorrow."

After she left, Mike said, "Are we... are we sure she's trustworthy?"

Max nodded very quickly, and after a second, Lucas said, "Yeah. I think she's alright. She gave me a weapon, she wouldn't do that if she was planning on double-crossing us or something."

"I'm not so worried about us." Mike said. "I'm worried that she set a building on fire."

"I've set buildings on fire." El said sharply.

Mike jumped. "I mean... they *made* you do that. Kali lit a house on fire to get our attention."

"No one was in it." Max said.

"And she just wants to help us." Dustin said. "And she knows your sister!"

"That doesn't mean anything." Mike said. "*I* don't even know my sister! She could be a bitch for all I know."

"She's my *sister*." El said, very firmly. "We can trust her."

"Yeah," Dustin said, "She's on the run, like us. And she wants to help."

Mike paused, glancing between everyone, before saying, "I mean... she is really nice. And she seems like she wants to help..."

"Then I say we let her," Lucas said. "But, trust me, Mike, if something goes wrong, we'll just stick together and run again."

"Nothing will go wrong." El said.

"El..." Dustin said carefully. "It's not that we don't like her, or trust you. It's just that we've... we're trying to be careful."

El glanced at him, before nodding slightly.

"That reminds me," Mike said, smiling slightly, "Who'd you name yourself after, again?"

El shook her head and flopped onto the bed, throwing her pillow over her head and yelling, "Sleep!" which caused everyone to burst into laughter.

The next morning, El woke up earlier than the others. She sat up, rubbed her eyes, and then walked into the next room over. She found the basket of clothes and threw on some overalls and a jacket; most of the outfits were black and dark, but these seemed a bit... well, unusual. She hadn't worn anything bright or comfortable like this for as long as she could remember.

She then moved back to the room, and eventually the others woke up. Mike stared at her for a while, before saying, "You look pretty."

El froze for a second, before saying, "Th-thank you."

The others eventually changed, too, though they didn't seem very happy about it. Max and Mike kept their original jackets on, though they changed shirt and pants, and Lucas and Dustin kept glancing towards their folded clothes, as if they expected them to vanish.

After a minute or two, Mike said, "Kali said she'd get us, right?"

"When she was ready." Lucas replied.

"Well," Max said, standing up and stretching, "I, for one, would like to eat something. So I'm just gonna go down there and raid the fridge. Wanna come?"

"I seriously doubt that's something we can do." Dustin said.

"Why not? We're part of Kali's group, and they never said we *couldn't* steal their food." Max shrugged.

"You think we're part of the group?" Lucas asked, a little hopefully, as he stood up.

"Of course." Max grinned. "And if we're not, we're close enough. We're fighters, right?"

The kids glanced to each other, and then El said, "Okay. Let's go."

Max went out first, with Lucas following close behind. The kids went down the stairs, glancing towards each other on occasion. They moved in silence until they reached the door just outside what they thought was the kitchen. El moved to open the door, but stopped when she heard a loud conversation inside.

"*Damnit*, Axel, they're just *kids*. It's not like they've got superpowers!"

"Yow know I can't deal with little shits like them!"

"They can take care of themselves mainly, you just have to make sure they don't die!"

"Jesus, Kal, I actually can't deal with this! Just let me come, Fun can stay!"

"We *need* Fun-"

The kids looked at each other, fear in all of their eyes, and then El opened the door, rushing in, yelling, "You're *leaving*?"

Kali jumped, and she turned towards El as the other kids rushing in behind her. She and the gang were sitting at the table, coffee mugs basically empty, and they all looked very surprised to see the kids.

"I told you I'd come get-" Kali began.

"Why are you leaving?" El asked, panicked.

"Is something wrong?" Mike added.

"Did we do something?" Max asked.

"Are you coming back?" Lucas reached for something in his pocket, eyes wide.

"Are we gonna be alone?" Dustin added.

Kali held up her hands, waiting until they all quieted down, before saying, "Robin sent another telegram, she thinks she knows where

Nancy will be by tonight or tomorrow. We're going to try and send her a message. And *I'm* trying to get you all a babysitter."

"We don't need a *babysitter*." Lucas said.

"We want to come!" El said quickly.

"We can't travel with all of you in the van." Kali said. "It was fine for a quick trip to headquarters, but not all the way to another town. That'll be ten people, who all need space and food and bathroom breaks, and that's a lot of people to keep track of should we end up pursued. Add to that the fact that four of you have barely had any training-

"We want to *come*." El said. "What if Papa-

"Brenner won't find you." Kali said sharply. "Not here."

"-finds *you* ?"

Kali's face darkened. "Then we'll take care of him."

"What if more Arsonists get to you?" Mike asked. "Or Volunteers? What if they get you trapped and-"

"We'll be fine."

"How can you say that?"

Kali paused, glancing towards her Gang, almost as if she was having a silent conversation. Then, she said, "You really don't want to know."

"I do." El said quickly. "No lies, Kal."

Kali turned back, and then smiled a little. "Hm. Might be nice to tell somebody, actually."

"Tell us what?" Dustin asked.

"VFD? They can't do anything to us." Kali said smugly, spinning slightly in her chair.

“Why not?” El asked.

Kali smirked, smiling up at her sister. “Because we have the Sugar Bowl.”

El’s eyes widened instantly, completely freezing over in shock. The rest of Kali’s gang smiled, too, while the Party simply glanced at each other.

Finally, Max said, “What’s the... Sugar Bowl?”

“You could call it anything.” Kali said. “But let’s just say that both sides of VFD have been looking for it for quite some time.”

“It’s *here*?” El asked, a slightly fearful tone to her voice.

“Well,” Kali said, “No. We’re not dumb enough to leave it unattended. But we have its exact location and happen to have an ally guarding it.”

“You... you know what’s inside?” El sounded fascinated, curious.

Kali, however, simply narrowed her eyes. “Yes. But we’re not telling you now, it’s... something you have to see for yourself, let’s say. Add to that the fact that the more people who know about it, the more people who can get hurt trying to-”

“So, what does it mean?” Dustin asked. “That now you have it, no one can hurt you?”

“Both sides want it.” Mick explained. “And will do anything to learn where it is.”

“So that puts in you in more danger.” Mike said.

“Not exactly.” Kali said.

“Here’s what happens,” Dottie said. “We get cornered. We exchange information on the Sugar Bowl for our escape route and whatever else we can get at the moment. And then we send them in the wrong direction.”

“Won’t they know you’re lying?” Lucas asked.

“We can be very convincing.” Kali said. “Especially me.”

“What are we going to do with it?” El asked, still staring at her sister.

“Our original plan was to pick it up after we finished our field trip with Nancy and Steve,” Kali said, “But now we’ve got you all, we’re thinking of getting to it after we get Will.”

“And then what?” El asked.

“Then we find a safe place for you.” Kali said. “And once VFD’s been taken down, or we get a bigger van, we’ll join you.”

“I want to *help you*.” El said stubbornly.

“You can help me,” Kali said, “By not dying. Just stay here, and we’ll-”

“What happens if we get attacked?” Max asked, a little panicky.

Kali paused, before saying, “Alright, listen. Should a VFD member break in, we have a second headquarters in the nearby town of Stain’d by the Sea- just follow the road through town, out into the woods, until you get to a hill. There’s a cottage on the edge of town painted white; we go there when we need to lay low; as a bonus, we’re probably going to send some friends there to meet up with us. If you end up hiding there, you can get food from Black Cat Coffee. Nobody’s ever there.”

El looked very interested. “Stain’d?”

Kali smiled slightly and nodded. “Yes, but hopefully you won’t need to go there alone.”

“Are you *sure* we can’t come?” Mike asked.

“As much as I’d like you to fight with me,” Kali said, “We can’t travel in such a large group without drawing attention. I just need someone to stay with you-”

"We can stay by ourselves." Max said. "We've been taking care of ourselves all week."

"And we can practice codes while you're out." Lucas added.

"There should be enough food around for, like, a day." Mike said. "And we can survive without for a little bit if it comes to that."

Kali glanced between them carefully, and then said, "If you're alright with being alone..."

"I'm *not*!" El said. "I don't want you to go!"

"Jane," Kali said, standing up and placing her hand on her shoulder. "I'll be back before you know it. And..." she paused, before smiling slightly. "When we get back to pick you guys up, I'll tell you about the Sugar Bowl."

El's eyes widened again. "Really?"

"Yeah." Kali said. "Can you imagine? We got it before any one of our mentors could even get their hands on it."

"We *actually* have it." El said, almost disbelievingly.

Kali nodded, before turning back to her Gang. "Alright, pack up. We're leaving immediately, we want to get back as soon as possible." She turned to the kids and said, "Grab some food from the fridge. Jane, can I talk to you in private for a minute?"

El nodded, and as everyone filtered out, Kali said, "Hopefully I'll be able to take you out on one of our outings soon. I think it'll help you, help you figure out how to... how to heal from all the shit they've done to you."

"They... they were training..."

"They were *hurting* us, Jane." Kali said. "They hurt us, saw us as weapons instead of children. Those kids-" she gestured towards the kitchen door, "-were not raised like us. They were raised to grow and learn on their own."

El bit her lip, and then said, "I... I did run. Because they kept hurting me. But... they're family."

"They're not family." Kali said sharply. "They took our lives away from us. And the sooner you learn that, the better." After a pause, she said, "I don't want to put more pressure on you, Jane, but... if something *does* happen, I want you to get yourself as far away from VFD as possible, you understand?" And when El nodded, Kali added, "And if you can... those children need protection."

"I'm protecting them." El said, smiling slightly.

"Just remember to protect yourself, too." Kali said.

The sisters hugged, then, clutching each other tightly. And when Kali pulled away, she said, "I'll be back before you know it. And then we'll catch up, yeah? I can show you the world."

El smiled. "I think I'd like that."

35. Update: VFD still sucks

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Update: VFD still sucks

The kids ate in silence after the gang had left, until Mike said, “Looks like we’re alone again.”

“But they’re coming back.” Lucas said. “They’re coming back for us and then we’ll find a safe place.”

“Are we sure it’s safe?” Max asked. “Maybe they only think it’s safe, maybe it’s only temporary...”

“If it’s *not* safe,” Dustin said, “Where are we supposed to *go*? Are we going to *ever* stop running?”

They stared at each other, and then Mike said, “Listen to us. We’ve been on our own for *one week*, and we’re already paranoid.”

“Can you blame us? Our lives have been a lie.” Lucas said.

“It’s been *one week*. Maybe... maybe things’ll work out.” Mike said, smiling slightly. “Kali’s bringing my sister back, and then we’re going to get Will. And then... then we’re going to be together. And it’ll be... it’ll be okay.”

They were quiet for a bit, and then Max said, “Uh, Funshine showed me where the weapons are. You guys wanna play with those?”

El and Dustin nodded, but Lucas said, “I think I’ll be upstairs. Practicing codes and stuff.”

“I’ll go with you.” Mike said, not noticing El look a little upset at that. “We’ll be upstairs if you guys need us.”

Once they were back in their room, Lucas pulled Mike's notebook out from under the mattress, flipping it open. "Hey, guess what code I've got half-deciphered?"

"What? *Really?*" Mike said, eyes widening. He shut the door and sat next to Lucas, bouncing on the mattress for a second. "What does it say? What does it say?"

"Slow down, Mike!" Lucas said, flipping ahead to pages he'd written the translation on. "Now, I haven't got all of it. But... it's a start. I can... I can summarize, if you want. I'd like to tell Max and Dustin at some point, but... well, you could consider this a test run."

Mike watched him, as Lucas started to talk. "So, uh, she starts by... saying she's a Phoenix. Part of the Phoenix thing her and Kali were in, right? Except they had other siblings, and they're... they're gone. El was the last one, at least to her knowledge. And El sounds like she hated it, hated having to... to 'keep the world quiet.'"

"Keep the world quiet?"

"Her words, not mine. She... she then goes on to talk a lot about VFD. How there was a schism sometime before she was born, but we knew that. And she... she then talked a bit about her childhood. And it's... God, Mike, it's fucking *disgusting*."

Mike paused, and then said, "Let me read it."

"No, no, I can summarize-

"I want to read it, Lucas, just give me my notebook."

Lucas paused, before passing it over. Mike found the paragraph in question, and slowly paled.

Papa loved me once, I think. He might still. But he's disappointed a lot more than he used to be. I can't fail. If I fail, he lets my mentors hurt me. They hit, they punch, they sting and burn and burn and I hate the burning the most. Because they want me to avoid it. They want me to be able to dance away from the fire, but if I can't, I just get burned more. No, no, that's wrong. I hate the darkness the most. Because if I'm not good enough, I'm put in the dark room until I'm not crying anymore. And they

don't talk to me, for as long as it takes for me to be quiet and do what they say. I can't count time in there. I lose days sometimes, I think. And then they give me food and ask if I'll be a good apprentice. And I am a good apprentice.

I'm not allowed to talk to the other apprentices. Not allowed to tell them I'm a Phoenix. But sometimes I hear them talk, when they stop by with their mentors, or when we're at Headquarters. They're raised the same. And the Volunteer children are too, I think, but without the fire. Maybe without the darkness. I wouldn't know.

They were very mad when Kali disappeared. So mad. I'd never seen them so mad. And they were mad at me, because I opened the door. And I... I'm still afraid I'll disappoint them like that again. That they'll punish me the same way. That they'll hurt me like that, hurt me so much that I can't move, but I have to, I have to go back to training even though I still hurt. Or else I'm a bad apprentice. And Papa lets it happen. He lets it happen and I don't know if he cares anymore or not.

"Holy shit." Mike said softly, not noticing that tears were springing to his eyes. "Holy shit, that's..."

Lucas nodded, and then Mike turned back to the pages, and he froze, staring at the next paragraph.

I thought that once they were done with me, once I finished this mission, they might let me go. Might tell me my apprenticeship was over, that I was a full Firestarter. But then I saw... I saw you. You were free. You were getting out. You didn't know what was going on, you couldn't dance through fire. You had a life outside of VFD. Something I never thought I could have. I thought that if I followed you, maybe I could have that, too. And I want to help get that back for you. And help you get back your Will. I don't want them to hurt him like they hurt me. Or you. I can't let them hurt you.

"I left off there." Lucas said softly. "I think she goes on about some more VFD stuff, but... there's only like a page left, I can probably finish it by tonight."

Mike bit his lip, and then he said, "She's so... strong. She's so strong, she got out of there on her own, she just wants to help us and stay

with us... shit, how long has it been since someone was *nice* to her?"

Lucas nodded. "It's... it's depressing."

They were silent for a minute, and then Mike said, "We need to finish translating this, don't we?"

Lucas nodded slightly.

"I'll help." Mike said. "I'll help and... once we get somewhere safe, I guess we'll have to show El how the world works, yeah?"

"Yeah." Lucas laughed a little. "She was watching TV while we were in that house, and she didn't even know what a boyfriend was."

"Why... why did she want to know?"

Lucas gave him a look, before saying, "You know what? Let's just keep translating."

"Hopper, stop the car."

It was almost nighttime, and Nancy had almost fallen asleep on Steve's shoulder when the car screeched to a halt. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, as Hopper said, "What?"

"That house." Joyce pointed ahead, and Nancy had to squint to see a house on the side of the road, barely visible in the dark.

"What about it?" Jonathan asked.

Joyce narrowed her eyes. "Pull up to it."

"Joyce, we should keep driving..."

"Just pull up to it, Hop."

When they parked outside, Joyce jumped out of the car first, rushing into the house before the rest of them could even process what was going on. Jonathan and Hopper went in after her, followed by Nancy and Steve, who moved to finger the matchboxes in their pockets, just

in case.

Upon stepping inside, Nancy instantly froze, grabbing onto the matchbox in preparation to whip it out at a moment's notice. The VFD Eye was etched into the wood walls, and as Joyce moved to light a lantern, Nancy started to see more of it. "Where is this?" she asked cautiously.

"Volunteer Safehouse." Joyce said, glancing around. "But I don't think anybody is here..."

"Then why are we stopping?"

"Because I know what's here." Joyce said, moving to another room, followed closely by Hopper.

Jonathan turned towards the other teens, and they stared at each other. Then, he said, "So... this has been quite the week, hasn't it?"

"Joyce, what are you looking for?"

Joyce sighed as she scanned the room. "Piano. Not in this room, though."

"Why would you-"

"I'll tell you when I find it." Joyce moved to open the door into the next room, but paused for a second. She turned towards Hopper and said, "Hop... once we get the kids back, you know we can't take them back to Hawkins, right?"

Hopper hesitated before nodding. "I... yeah."

"You... you can probably head back, if you want. Say that it was a dead end, that Jonathan and I ran off to try and find Will, just... pretend none of this happened."

"Joyce," Hopper said, "I'm not leaving until I know those kids are safe."

“It’s out of your jurisdiction now.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t want to help.”

Joyce nodded quietly, and then opened the door, lighting another lamp with her lighter. She then called, “Jonathan! Nancy! Steve! Come on!”

As the teens rushed in, and Hopper leaned against the wall, Joyce moved to stand in front of a small, dusty piano.

“What is this?” Jonathan asked.

“Looks like a musical code cue.” Nancy explained quickly. “Sometimes passwords are hidden in certain tunes, so playing a couple of keys can open up a door.”

“We just need to know which tune it is.” Steve said. “Which, uh, the Firestarters aren’t told Volunteer passwords for very obvious reasons.”

“From what I remember...” Joyce said. “There are three possible songs I could use...”

She started playing for a second, a tune quickly recognized as some old jazz song. She only played for a minute though, and when nothing happened, she said, “Alright, second try.” This song was a lot faster, a bit more depressing, too.

And when that didn’t work, Joyce sighed and said, “Goddamnit.”

Then she started to play another song, one that sounded vaguely like *Row Your Boat* . Something opened on the wall besides the piano, some sort of secret compartment. Joyce jumped up, rushing over and reaching in.

She pulled out a note, and sighed. “Shit, I was hoping for-” Then she scanned the paper, and her eyes went wide. “Oh, fuck.”

“What’s that say?” Hopper asked.

“It’s a warning.” Joyce explained. “To any Volunteers taking up

residence. It's a list of active Firestarters stationed nearby..."

"Who's there?" Steve said, rushing over to read the note.

Quickly, Joyce shoved the paper in her jacket pocket. "Doesn't matter. I was hoping there'd be more files here on nearby apprentices, this isn't useful anyway, we should keep moving."

Jonathan narrowed his eyes. "Mom, who's on it?"

"It doesn't *matter*."

"I might know them." Steve said. "I could-"

"We're moving on anyway. We can just go." Joyce said. Something was *clearly* bothering her, something she didn't want to say. And Jonathan was getting *very* tired of her not telling him things.

"Mom, *who's on it?*"

Joyce shook her head, moving to leave, but in a flash, Steve reached into her pocket, slipping the paper out and rushing towards the piano, jumping on top and saying, "Wow, Carrie's up front? She's not *that* dangerous, God!"

"Steve!" Joyce yelled.

"Oh, I'm seeing Charlie, and Ally, and Cathy... oh! There's Reed! Ashley M, nice. And..." Steve's face paled. "Oh. Oh shit."

Joyce finally managed to grab the paper back, but Jonathan rushed forwards, reaching for it. "Jonathan, leave it *alone!*" Joyce said, backing up.

"Mom, *what's wrong?*" Jonathan asked, his voice raising. "What can't you show us?"

"It's..."

"I want to *know*, Mom! I want to know what's going on! I want to be able to know something for *once* !" Jonathan said, frustration finally boiling over. "Mom, just *tell me something!*"

Joyce froze for a second, and after a long pause, she said, "Do you... Jonathan, I didn't think..." She didn't think he was this frustrated, this upset with the secrets.

"Please, just... what's *wrong*?"

Joyce stared at him for a long while, and then she looked down at the paper, as if she could burn it with her eyes.

Then, she said, "Your Father's stationed in the next town over."

There was a deathly silence, as Jonathan stared at his Mom, his mouth opening with shock. Hopper stayed silent, not entirely sure what had just happened. Steve glanced between them, looking very nervous.

Then, he said, "Where'd Nancy go?"

They found Nancy a few rooms over, having wandered off upon hearing static. She was standing a few feet from a TV, her spyglass held out and pointed at the screen.

"Nancy, why'd you-" Jonathan began.

"We have to get to Stain'd by the Sea." Nancy said sharply, not moving from her position.

"What?" Steve said, jumping. "Nance, that place is *not* VFD friendly."

"It's on the way." Joyce said hesitantly, sounding oddly blank. "And pretty close by. But why would we need to stop there?"

"I just got a message from Kali." Nancy said. "They have the other kids, we're regrouping there."

"They have the other kids?" Joyce asked, shocked.

"Apparently her sister managed to track her down." Nancy smirked, turning around and closing the spyglass. She glanced towards the Byers, and said, "Now... what was in the piano compartment?"

Jonathan glanced at Joyce, before hesitantly saying, "Nothing..."

nothing important.”

36. The Party is, once again, on the Run

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The Party is, once again, on the Run

Max woke up on the couch, rubbed her eyes, looked down, and instantly said, “Shit.”

They’d fallen asleep the night before after spending all day going over weapons and codes. Max had managed to claim a baseball bat, while Lucas preferred his Wrist-Rocket and El managed to pocket multiple daggers and throwing knives. Dustin weakly grabbed a knife, not very comfortable with the idea of a weapon, while Mike proved to be incredibly horrible at everything they handed to him, and ended up just grabbing a flashlight and a candlestick and calling it a day. Lucas had shown them El’s notes, too, which just made Max feel *really* awful. She felt pretty awful right now, too, but for a very different reason.

Slowly, Max stood up, making sure she didn’t wake up Mike, who had fallen asleep sitting up on the other end of the sofa. She walked over to Dustin, and kicked him until he groaned to signal he was awake.

“Hey.” she said. “Where’s the bag with the pads?”

“Whaa?” Dustin said, still exhausted.

“The pads.” Max said stiffly. “Where are they?”

“Mmm.” Dustin groaned. “Bags’re under the bed.”

Max leaned down, reaching under the bed that El was asleep on, and eventually found the bag they’d shoved the box of pads in. She took it over to the other room, where she picked out her old clothes- no sense accidentally leaking onto someone else’s clothes more than once.

She changed pretty quickly, smiling a bit as she put her old jacket back on, a little more comfortable now that she was in her own clothes. Unfortunately, just when she'd finished up, she heard a crash, and Mike's scream.

She instantly rushed out the door, sliding down the hall and back into the bedroom, hearing the rest of the kids start shouting at Mike for something. She threw the door open, and yelled, "What happened? Who died?"

Mike looked up at her from the floor, eyes wide. "Max!" he yelled, almost angrily. "What the *fuck*?"

"What happened?" Lucas asked, too.

"What's going on?" Dustin shouted, suddenly very awake.

El sat up and rubbed her eyes, looking very alert.

"Mike, what's going on?" Max asked again.

"Oh, nothing much!" Mike shouted, scrambling to his feet. "I just woke up from a nightmare, noticed you were missing, and saw a *bloodstain on the couch*! Not freaky at all!"

"Blood?" Lucas asked, also jumping up. "What? Who's bleeding?"

"That'd be me." Max admitted, glaring daggers at Mike.

"Oh my *God*!" Lucas instantly ran over, grabbing Max and turning her around. "What happened? Did you cut yourself? Are you hurt?"

"Get *off*!" Max said, pushing him away slightly. "My period started, it's no big deal."

"Oh." Lucas said, suddenly a bit embarrassed.

He stepped back, as Mike said, "Well... you could've, like..."

"I was just going to get changed." Max shrugged. "I was gonna be back soon."

“Your period?” El asked, narrowing her eyes slightly.

Max glanced towards her. Surely she knew what that was? “Yeah, when my body gets pissed I’m not having a kid so it shoves all the blood-”

“Oh.” El said, nodding. “Menstrual cycle.”

“Yeah, that.” Max said. “As if this week couldn’t get any worse, huh? Now, Kali’s getting back soon probably, so you all should probably get changed, too. She said she might be picking us up and taking us somewhere, yeah? Let’s make sure everything’s packed up.”

They slowly nodded and got up, with Lucas still looking a bit embarrassed and Mike still looking a bit pissed. Dustin glanced towards Max and said, “Uh, so, are you gonna have cramps, or...?”

“Well, I *assume*.” Max said. “So that should be fun.”

Max’s cramps did indeed start about an hour later, and she decided the best way to deal with them was to curl up on the couch next to the kitchen and scream at everyone who tried to get near her.

“Is it that bad?” El asked cautiously.

“Well, we haven’t got any medication for her, so, probably.” Mike said.

El shuddered, before turning back towards the bed; Lucas and Dustin had decided to pack up the clothes and food, while Mike and El made sure nothing from their bags was missing. As Mike picked up one, he glanced towards the mattress, which his notebook was placed on top of. He slowly reached to pick up the notebook, and as he put it away, he noticed El shoulder her bag and walk into the hall. He ran after her and said quietly, “Uh, El? Can we... talk?”

El nodded, leaning against the wall, brushing a curl behind her ear. Mike watched her for a second, before saying, “Um, Lucas and I... well, mostly Lucas... we translated your... your notes. In my book.”

El froze, staring at him for a minute, before her gaze flitted towards his bag, which his notebook was sticking out of. She looked back towards him, a slight fear in her eyes.

“This... your notes. About your life.” Mike said carefully. “It’s fucked up. It’s fucked up, I’m so sorry this happened to you, and I don’t know what... I don’t know what we can... can do? God, I don’t... I’m just *sorry*, and we’re gonna try to help you get as far out of this as possible. As far away from VFD as possible. I... I just...”

El hadn’t moved since he’d started talking, just staring at him as he awkwardly tried to form his thoughts into words. But just as Mike started to trail off, El rushed forwards and threw her arms around him, hugging him tight. Mike jumped, surprised, but before he could even think he was hugging her back. He didn’t notice that El was crying for a minute, but once he did, he started whispering, “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

Then he heard a loud noise from outside. He pulled away from El, concentrating for a second before realizing that the sound was a car pulling up.

“Kali must be back!” Mike said, moving to run down the stairs.

Fortunately for him, El managed to grab his hand and drag him back a bit. “Wait.” she said.

“Wait for what?”

That was when Lucas burst out of another room, yelling, “It’s not Kali!”

“What?”

“Just looked out the window!” Dustin said, rushing down the stairs. “It’s a Firetruck. VFD.”

“VFD?” Mike asked, eyes wide. “Do Volunteer Firefighters have firetrucks?”

“Do you want to *risk it*?” Lucas asked, rushing past Dustin down the stairs. “Come on, we have to get Max and go!”

They rushed down the stairs, all cursing under their breath and hoping they could find Max before the Volunteers got into the building. Of course, the second they threw open the door to the next room, with Lucas calling for Max to get up and run, they realized that she wasn't there.

"Jesus *fuck*!" Lucas screeched.

"Where the *fuck* is she?" Dustin asked.

"Did they get her?" Mike added, starting to panic.

"They couldn't have-" Lucas looked terrified. "Max! *Max*!"

"Lucas, don't be so loud!" Dustin said. "We're gonna get-"

They heard a window smash, and froze over for a second. El was the first one to move, rushing towards the doorway and peering through, trying to spot the source of the noise. She shook her head slightly, about to step forwards some more to get a better look, when Mike grabbed her hand and pulled her back a bit. "No, don't!" he said.

"We're dead, we're dead, we're *dead*!" Dustin said.

"We're not dead!" Lucas yelled. "We need to find Max and get out-!"

They heard the front door open, and they all instantly fell silent, not wanting anyone to know where they were. They stared at each other, and then El slowly approached the doorway again, with Mike carefully following her and keeping his grip on her arm. Lucas eventually rushed after them, staying close to their side and looking around for Max, while Dustin trailed close behind, glancing behind them to make sure no one was following.

They eventually moved out of the room, finding their way into the kitchen, where they could see the broken window. Lucas rushed over to it, standing underneath the shattered remains of the window and peering out. Nothing else in the room seemed broken or anything, and after a second, Dustin whispered, "Do you think someone came in this way?"

Lucas shook his head quickly. "Look at the ground. What *don't* you

see?”

They glanced down, and El quickly said, “Shards.”

“It was broken from the inside.” Lucas said. “Maybe someone accidentally threw something?”

The kids glanced at each other, and then they heard another door slam, and more footsteps running towards them. Without another word, they took off at a run, with Lucas reaching to grab onto Dustin’s hand as they ran to the next room. The back way out should’ve been close, maybe Max was already there, and they could run out and make their way to Stain’d. It couldn’t be that hard, they just had to get there without being spotted.

They slid into the back room, barely missing a stack of boxes. They froze in their tracks, though, when they saw the back door was wide open.

“It’s probably Max.” Lucas whispered.

“She’d wait for us.” Mike replied. “She’d... we can’t go out this way, what if they’re waiting for us?”

“We can’t stay *here!*” Dustin said.

“We can’t leave without Max!” Lucas said, a bit louder.

“Shut *up!*” Mike said. “We’re gonna get-”

That was when El let out a piercing shriek, and they all whipped around to stare at her, horrified. El started breathing deeply, her eyes wide with terror, and she glanced down, to see a throwing knife stuck in her leg.

Instantly, Lucas rushed to the door, shutting it and blocking them in the room. Before it closed, he could see a teenager, maybe a few years older than them, standing a few feet away, her hand extended, looking a little shocked. One of the Volunteers, definitely. This was a bit more confirmed for them when they heard shouts of “They’re here!” from the other side of the door.

Dustin pushed the box stack over, effectively blocking the door. El, meanwhile, had dropped to her knees, shutting her eyes and trying not to scream. Mike dropped next to her, putting his hands on her shoulders and saying, "El? Are you okay? El? Jane? *El?*"

He reached for the knife, and Dustin quickly said, "No, don't move it! It'll bleed more!"

"What do we *do?*" Mike asked, panicking. "She just got *stabbed!*"

"El, can you run?" Lucas asked.

El let out a small whimper, still struggling not to burst into tears, and shook her head.

"I can carry her." Mike volunteered.

"You can't carry *anything.*" Lucas retorted. "I think Kali had a spinning chair somewhere around here, we can drag her out on that."

"And then what? We can't very well carry that through the woods!" Dustin said.

"We'll figure it out." Lucas said. "We'll get Max, and get out, and get to the other city, and... and..." He looked close to tears. "We shouldn't have told them we could handle this, we should've let someone stay with us, *shit ...*"

There was a thud on the other side of the door, which was clearly someone- maybe the girl, maybe someone else- trying to open the door. The kids jumped, and as Dustin looked around for the chair, Lucas rushed to the door that led outside, peering out and calling, "Max?"

This was clearly a mistake, as he instantly retreated towards Mike and El. "Shit! Shit!" he said.

"Not Max?" Mike asked, glaring at him as he knelt behind El, trying to tear off a bit of his jacket to maybe wrap the wound with.

Lucas shook his head, running in front of them. "We have to move her *now*, we've-"

They heard footsteps running outside the door and froze, staring at each other. Dustin rushed over to them, jumping next to Lucas to stand in front of Mike and El.

So when the adult Volunteer turned the corner, staring at the children in that dumb patronizing look, Lucas had time to whip out his wrist-rocket and glanced around, looking for a projectile. If El hadn't been in a lot of pain, she might have whipped out one of her own throwing knives, but all she could managed to do was shoot a death-glare. Dustin managed to take out her own knife, but didn't look like he was much prepared to use it.

"Eat shit!" Lucas shouted.

"Children," said the Volunteer, almost tiredly, "This is getting old. We're trying to help you."

"Please," Mike said, his voice breaking as tears started to come to his eyes, "Please just go away. You've hurt us enough and you're *not* taking us away."

"How'd you find us?" Dustin asked quickly.

"We tracked a telegram to your location, apparently you were contacting one of our-"

"Shit." Mike muttered, wondering if this 'Robin' girl knew her messages had been tracked.

The door behind them thudded again, the boxes shaking and threatening to give. The adult stepped forwards, and Dustin held out the knife more, shutting his eyes. Lucas yelled, "Stay back! Just *stay back!*"

"It's alright, children." The Volunteer said. "We're just here to train you. We're a good and noble organization, and-"

"Go *away!*" Mike yelled, slowly moving to stand with Dustin and Lucas, trying to block El from any danger.

"Childre-"

A scream was heard from outside, and everyone froze for a minute. Lucas and Dustin lowered their weapons, just a bit, and the Volunteer turned, slightly concerned.

Then, after a second, and before anyone could process what was happening, Max burst into the room from outside, took one look at the Volunteer, and leapt, swinging her baseball bat and slapping him upside the head, knocking him to the ground.

“Max!” Lucas yelled.

Almost as if she didn’t hear him, Max used the baseball bat to hit the Volunteer again, knocking him out cold. She paused for a second to make sure he wouldn’t get up, and then she looked up, fire in her eyes. “I started this day laying in a puddle of my own blood,” she said darkly, “And it somehow managed to get *worse*.”

“Are you okay? What happened?” Lucas asked.

“They broke in and tried to grab me.” Max said. “So I kicked them and broke out the window. When none of you climbed out your own windows, I figured out you assholes were still inside, and decided to work out my anger in a very productive way.”

They heard a thud behind them, and Max dropped the baseball bat slightly. As the boys watched, she dropped beside the Volunteer, reaching onto his belt and pulling out some car keys.

“Now,” she said, flipping them in her hands, “Let’s get out of here.”

“E-El can’t move.” Mike managed to say.

Max sighed. “I’ll carry her. Get her into the backseat- Dustin, you know medical care, right?”

“A- a bit.”

“You’re in charge of her, then. Let’s *move*.”

37. Max finally gets to Steal a Car

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Max finally gets to Steal a Car

“This is the worst possible thing that could have happened today.” Lucas said.

“It’ll get worse if you don’t buckle your seatbelt.” Max said, as she turned the car on. “Also, you’re not bleeding incessantly. So, this truck doesn’t seem to have much water in it, my guess is it’s just for show, which is good, meaning I’ll be able to drive it easier. And we’re also going to have to move *fast*- you said that there was a girl throwing knives?”

“That’s what happened to El.” Mike said. He and Dustin were in the backseat, with El spread out between them; Dustin had informed her that she had to lay down, and so she had her head on Mike’s lap as Dustin inspected her leg, trying to apply pressure around the knife. It was kind of hard to see Lucas and Max over the wall separating the back of the car from the front, but Mike thought that was probably a good thing, as he wouldn’t know exactly how much shit they were in.

“Then we’re going to hope she doesn’t hit our tires.” Max said, and she reached down hitting the gas with some books she’d roped onto her foot. “Hold on!”

The truck moved a lot faster than the others thought, and Lucas and Dustin both screeched a little as it took off down the road.

“They’ll follow us as soon as they wake up and realize we’re not in the house.” Max said carefully. “And let’s just hope that Kali didn’t leave anything important in there. Also, does anyone else know how to drive? Because my cramps are *killing me*.”

“You don’t even know how to drive!” Lucas said.

“Of course I do, I just have trouble seeing over the windshield

sometimes.” Max shrugged. “We’re about to hit town, do *not* look out the window, try not to draw attention to yourselves. Lucas, look around and see if you can find a map. Mike, Dustin, make sure El doesn’t die.”

Dustin pulled El’s pant leg up a bit farther, and Mike paled at the sight of blood. He glanced down at El, who had gotten over the initial shock and pain and was simply trying to remain calm. “You’re gonna be okay, El. Promise.” Mike said carefully. “You’re going to be okay.”

“It doesn’t look like she hit an artery.” Dustin said. “Mike, make sure El doesn’t look over here, try to keep her calm.”

“You’re *gonna be okay*.” Mike said again. “El, come on, let’s talk about what we’re gonna do.”

“D-do?” El asked, very quietly.

“Once we’re out of VFD. I’ll be a writer. Maybe you can help. You’ve probably seen a lot of things I haven’t. But we can go stargazing, too. We can sit on a roof and look for constellations.”

El nodded slightly, shutting her eyes. Then, quietly, she said, “I’m sorry.”

“You did nothing wrong. You didn’t-”

“I’ve... been stabbed before. Didn’t hurt this much.”

Mike felt a flare of anger in his chest. “Who stabbed you?”

“I didn’t... didn’t dodge fast enough. But it was... just a bit...”

“That was awful.” Mike said angrily, as Dustin dug in the clothes bag, pulling out two gloves and putting them on. “That’s awful, El, I’m sorry.”

“Mike...?”

“Yeah?”

El slowly reached over, gripping onto his hand. “Tell me something.

About your home. Please.”

Mike smiled, as Dustin ripped some fabric off of a shirt to make a bandage. “It’s... it’s a real small town. Everyone knows everyone. The stores are going under, though, because a mall’s getting built. Holly thinks it’ll be cool, though, because she likes seeing malls in the movies.”

“Holly?”

“My sister. I think I told you about her, you know? She’s four, she’s a little explorer...”

El flinched as Dustin put some more pressure around her wound, and he said, “Okay, I’m gonna try to take the knife out, which normally is a bad idea, but I can’t really do much else. Just stay as still as you can, okay?”

“Okay...”

Dustin slowly reached forwards, pulling the knife out. El hissed slightly, as Dustin moved quickly to wrap the fabric around to absorb the blood and put pressure on it.

Quickly, Mike said, “We’ve got a movie theater. It’s pretty cool. Most movies don’t have subtitles, like the ones on TV, but sometimes Mom takes me to some with them. I think I liked *Rebecca* best, I saw it with Will and Ms. Byers while the others were at camp. Mom wouldn’t let me go to that and Ms. Byers couldn’t afford it.”

“Do we have any salt in the food bag?” Dustin yelled at the front.

“Yeah, but only a bit! In a little container! I stole it from the fridge.” Lucas shouted back. “Max, take a right-”

“Kali said straight all the way through. We go straight.”

“But-”

Dustin pulled a water bottle and salt out of the bag, and said, “Lucas? When we learned how to clean wounds, was it one tablespoon or teaspoon of salt to water?”

"I don't remember, we were, like, seven!"

"I'm gonna use tablespoon. How much is that?"

"I don't *know*!"

"What would you like to do?" Mike asked El, eying Dustin pour some salt into the water. "When we're out."

El considered for a bit, as Dustin approached the wound and slowly started to untie the fabric. "TV."

"TV?"

"Act." El said, smiling slightly. "It looks fun."

"Yeah, yeah! That sounds fun." Mike said.

Dustin poured some of the salt solution onto the wound, and El let out a scream. "Shit! Sorry! Yeah, I should've warned you it'd hurt!" Dustin yelled.

El flinched, trying to pull her leg back, but Dustin reached forwards and pulled it back towards him.

"What's going on back there?" Max yelled.

"Cleaning the wound!" Dustin called. "It doesn't hurt that much, I swear!"

"If you kill her, so help me, I will turn this car around!" Max shouted.

"Go *right*!"

"I'm going *straight*, Lucas!"

"Maybe you could get into theater." Mike said quickly, trying to distract El as she started to quietly cry.

"Theater?" she sniffled.

"It's like TV, but live." he said.

“Oh. Oh, plays.” El said. “W-we learned play codes.”

“But you don’t have to do codes. You can just act on stage.” Mike said. “It’s like TV, but you get live reactions. Dustin did some theater in Hawkins, at school.” Dustin nodded as he started to tie a different strip of fabric to the wound. “You might like that better. You won’t have to do, like, a million takes.”

“Takes?”

“Yeah. Movies usually aren’t filmed live, they film the scenes a lot of times to get everything just right.”

El flinched again as Dustin tied the fabric tight around her leg, winding it a little to make a bigger bandage.

“Maybe we can go to school.” Mike said. “I hate school normally, but I don’t think the gang’ll be patient enough to homeschool us, do you? And you’ve never been to school, I assume?” El shook her head. “Well, we sit at desks in rooms for a few hours, and people teach us things.”

“Sit?” El looked upset at the idea. “For *hours*?”

“Yeah, but you learn a lot of cool things. Like we learned how the brain works last year. I bet you know that, right?” She nodded. “But we got to do a cool project where we made the brain outta paper, colored in different parts. Will loved that. Will *loves* art. Do you like art?”

El smiled. “Only a few... a few codes we could do. So they... didn’t train us much. But it was fun. The colors... so *many* colors.”

“You like colors? What’s your favorite?”

El considered. “Pink. It’s pretty.”

“We’ll get you something pink when we get to Stain’d.” Mike promised. “Like a dress. Or a shirt. Or a jacket! Then you can wear it *all* the time!”

El smiled slightly. “Pink bandage? Or knife?” She giggled, and Mike

awkwardly laughed with her.

“Speaking of which,” Dustin said, “I think we’re good for now. El, just... try not to move much.”

“What the *fuck*?” Max yelled.

“What? What’s going on?” Dustin asked.

“That’s why you needed to go *right*!” Lucas yelled. “There’s a *gate* that gets us out of town, now we’re gonna have to go the long way around! And if the Volunteers have an alternate vehicle, they could catch up...”

“Or,” Max said, a dangerous glint to her voice, “We could go right through the fence.”

Everyone was shocked into silence for a second, and then Mike said, “Max, no.”

“Max, no!” Lucas and Dustin both repeated.

“Max, yes!” Max cheered.

The boys kept yelling, “Max! No!” on repeat as she hit the gas, and eventually El managed to join in, and they were all screaming as Max ran right into a fence, knocking part of it down with the force of impact.

“Whoo!” she cheered.

“We’re so fucking *dead*.” Dustin groaned.

“Excuse you,” Max said, “I’ve been in *Heaven* the last several minutes.”

“And the rest of us are in Hell. Great.” Mike said.

“Don’t worry.” Max said. “I just need to turn a bit and I’m on the road outta town. Then we’ll have a bit of a drive... we have gas in the trunk, right? Cause otherwise we might have to walk a bit.”

"Please don't make us walk." Dustin groaned.

"Yeah, we're not sure how far El can go." Mike added.

"Well, then, we *better* have gas."

"Max?" Lucas said quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Please," he said, "Don't *ever* drive through a fence again."

"Hmm. Guess it depends on if there's a fence around Stain'd."

"Anyone wanna jump ship now?" Dustin asked, as the rest of them groaned.

In another car, several miles away, Jonathan said, "How much longer are we gonna be in here?"

"Stain'd is about a night's drive away." Joyce said.

Nancy and Jonathan both groaned, not wanting to wait much to be able to get to the kids.

"Remember, Kal herself might not even be there." Steve said. "We'll probably arrive before them, since she probably stayed behind to send her TV message a few more times."

"Maybe we shoulda found her before we left." Nancy said quietly. "We could've all gone together. Maybe the kids'll be freaked out to see us. The last they saw of us, we were setting stuff on fire."

"They know us." Jonathan assured her. "If we tell them you guys are safe, they should believe us."

"And don't worry." Hopper said, as he noticed the teens sulking in the back. "Once we get to the kids, we can keep them safe. And you know what? I think they'll be happy to see us."

38. The Party has Severe Trust Issues

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The Party has Severe Trust Issues

The Party drove for quite some time, until it was already dark. There did, in fact, happen to be gas in the back, so they didn't have to walk, which Mike was very thankful for. None of them wanted to walk in the bleak landscape for any amount of time, and El hadn't tested her leg yet. In fact, by the time Max announced that she could see a sign announcing that Stain'd was close by, El had fallen asleep, her head still on Mike's leg.

El eventually woke up, as the road got quite bumpy after they'd passed the sign. Lucas apparently had fallen asleep and awoken, too, because he'd said something quietly to Max, and she'd responded, "Well, it's not my fault this town is so far away from civilization. Get it together. At least we're not being followed."

"Why is this road so bumpy?" Dustin asked, rubbing his eyes; he'd almost passed out.

"We're driving on seashells." Max responded.

"What?" they'd all said, and Mike and Dustin ran over to the windows, peering out to see they were, in fact, driving on tons of seashells.

"Why's the road like this?" Lucas asked.

"I don't *fucking* know." Max said.

"Are you sure we're going the right way?" Mike asked.

"Kali said to keep going straight." Max said. "And we're going straight."

As Mike and Dustin turned back to the window, they noticed an

island a little ways away, which looked like brick buildings surrounded by a brick wall, looking pretty old. Mike thought he could see people running around them, but he couldn't really tell with how fast and bumpy they were moving.

Only a few feet farther, they passed what looked like a tall forest; however, upon closer inspection, the forest wasn't populated by trees, but by seaweed.

"What the hell..." Lucas muttered.

El crawled over towards the window, looking out. She gasped, looking amazed. "The Clusterous Forest."

"What is it?" Lucas asked her.

"They drained the sea." El explained. "And the seaweed kept growing."

"Oh, God!" Mike said, grabbing his shirt and using it to cover his nose. The scent of fish and mud had just hit them, and everyone said something similar and ducked away from the windows.

"How do you know about this town?" Mike asked.

El hesitated. "Kali was on a mission, to steal files. But she kept some, in secret. And we read them."

"They were about Stain'd?"

El shrugged, in a way that basically communicated 'more-or-less'.

Max ended up having to drive up a hill, which apparently wasn't fun, as she started cussing a lot, but they'd gotten off of the seashells, at least. They passed a lighthouse by the time the fish smell had faded, and Max pulled the car up besides a white cottage only a little bit farther away. "This is what Kali told us to look for, right?" she said.

"Yeah." Lucas said, as Mike and El nodded. "Max, we should go in first, with your bat and my wrist rocket, make sure nobody's there. You guys come in when we tell you it's safe."

They left the car, with Max groaning about her cramps again, and they went into the house. After only a few seconds, they walked out and waved, and Dustin and Mike helped El out of the car. She managed to walk pretty quickly- probably part of her training- and they wandered into the cottage, with a faded arch labelling what it used to be called above the doorway.

It was a one-room cottage, with a fireplace in every corner. They all flinched at that, but none of them were lit until El bent over one and used one of her matches to provide them with some decent heat. A cot was pushed against the wall, looking unused, and a table was on the opposite wall, a stool placed under it. Nothing else seemed to be in the house.

“Okay, who wants the cot?” Mike asked.

“El should take it. She’s hurt.” Max said.

El shook her head. “I’ll be fine.” she said unconvincingly. “Max should take it. Cramps.”

Max did end up sleeping on the cot, while the rest of them dumped clothes on the floor and made piles to sleep on, with the exception of El, who just crawled on top of the table and fell asleep there. They swapped out watches all night again, every other hour, but they left Max and El alone, feeling that both of them deserved a nice nap.

Once morning arrived, they passed out food to each other while Max leaned on Lucas’s shoulder and muttered something about feeling slightly better. El ate quite fast and used the remaining time to clean off the knife that’d been stuck in her leg previously; she said something about not wanting it to go to waste and adding it to her collection.

“Do you think Kali’ll be worried when she comes back and we’re not there?” Dustin asked, picking apart a chip from the bag he’d grabbed for breakfast.

“Well, she’ll probably just head here.” Mike said.

“But she might be worried.” Dustin replied.

“She won’t be for long. Cause we’re safe.” Lucas said.

“She’ll know we’re safe.” El said, flinching as she moved her leg. “I’m here.”

“Here, let me check your wound again.” Dustin said, moving towards her bandage and slowly undoing it.

“Not while we’re *eating*!” Max yelled.

“You’ll be *fine*.” Dustin said, though he did move a bit in front of the leg so they wouldn’t have to see much. He hissed slightly, but he did say, “Looks better than yesterday. Here, I ripped up another shirt for you, let me re-wrap it. It should take about ten days to heal...”

“How did you learn all this medical stuff?” Mike asked.

“Camp, and also books in Lucas’s attic.” Dustin said. “You know, the ones you and Lucas said were too boring?”

“You read those medical books?” Mike asked, shocked.

“Yeah. Cause I read *useful* shit.”

Max stared at him. “Didn’t you read that series about cats in the-”

Max was cut off by a loud rev of an engine. Everyone looked towards the door, a panic settling in. It took them a few seconds to realize why the noise scared them so much, when they should’ve been expecting a car for a while now; it didn’t sound like Kali’s van.

Lucas rushed to the window, peering out for only a second before racing back, as everyone hurried to pack up the remains of their food.

“Who is it?” Mike asked, worriedly.

“Don’t know.” Lucas said.

“There isn’t a back door out.” Max noted.

“You think they saw the firetruck?” Dustin asked.

“Of *course* they saw the big-ass firetruck!” Lucas yelled, glaring at

him.

“We could climb out a window.” Mike suggested, as he grabbed El’s hand to help her to her feet.

“Wait.” Dustin said. “What if it’s Kali’s friends?”

“What?” Lucas replied.

“She said she had friends. What if they’re back? And we run from someone who could help us?”

They glanced at each other and then Mike said, “Okay, new plan. Everyone get your weapons, stand around El- I know you’re the best fighter, El, but we don’t want them to be able to see your bad leg. If we need to make a quick getaway, and El finds that she can’t run, who can carry her?”

“I can.” Dustin and Max both said, as they rushed to the bag against the wall, respectively pulling out a knife and a bat. Lucas pulled out his wrist-rocket and a rock he’d collected from outside, and slowly, they all surrounded El, backing towards a corner of the room.

“What if they have the place surrounded?” Lucas asked.

“We can run as fast as we can.” Mike said. “And everyone hold hands; we’re not letting anyone get separated again.”

They nodded seriously at each other, and El stood just behind Mike, grabbing his arm and peering over his shoulder, using her other hand to reach into her pocket, grabbing one of her throwing knives, just in case.

The kids all stared at the door as they heard footsteps run up the path, and someone knock into the archway, probably having tripped. Lucas loaded the wrist-rocket, but didn’t lift it just yet. Max even slackened slightly on her baseball bat, glancing towards the others with confusion.

Then the door opened, and the kids snapped to attention, turning back to the door.

And then they all froze.

In the doorway, Joyce Byers and Chief Jim Hopper were staring at them, completely shocked.

There was an awkward pause for a minute, and then Joyce lit up, moving forwards across the room, saying, “Kids, thank *God*, are you-”

She stopped moving, though, when the kids instantly tensed up and backed away. Lucas whipped his wrist-rocket up, pulling his arm back. Max raised the bat, stepping slightly in front of Dustin, who still wasn’t entirely comfortable with his weapon. Mike grabbed the first thing he could reach in his jacket pocket, which happened to be his flashlight. El, though incredibly confused, picked up on the situation quickly and stepped back slightly, flipping her knife in her hand in case she had to throw it.

“Get the *fuck* away from us!” Lucas yelled.

“Do you think they’re doing okay?” Jonathan asked.

They hadn’t wanted to be cooped up another minute, so the teens had sat in the grass, hidden behind the car and staring at the sky.

“They haven’t come get us yet, which could be either good or bad.” Nancy shrugged. “Depends on how Kal reacts to them. I *told* your Mom she shouldn’t have gone in, Kali won’t want to see her. She’d react better to me and Steve-”

“Wait, why won’t Kali want to see my Mom?” Jonathan asked.

Nancy stammered. “W-well... she doesn’t like... strangers. But your Mom was all, ‘oh, if Kali’s not there, there might be enemies, look at the firetruck, let me go in first, it’s not like you have weapons proficiency-”

“*Nancy.*” Jonathan narrowed his eyes. “Why wouldn’t Kali want to see my Mom?”

Nancy stared at Jonathan for a second, looking like a deer caught in

the headlights.

And then Steve said, “Uh, Nance? We got company.”

They followed his gaze, and saw a bunch of people rushing up the hill. Nancy jumped to her feet first, saying, “It’s okay, it’s them!”

She waved, but froze when Kali ran right by her, rushing towards the cottage. Steve stepped in front of Axel, who was right behind her, and said, “Axe, what the fuck’s going on?”

“We just got here.” Mick explained, rushing up beside her friend as Dottie and Funshine managed to catch up. “By train. Had to ditch the van, were almost spotted by-”

“Are you *insane*?” Axel interrupted, grabbing Steve by the shoulders and shaking him slightly. “You’re with Byers?”

“She just wants her kid back.” Nancy said, pushing Axel slightly to get him off of Steve. “She’s not with Lonnie, I swear-”

“Hey, hey!” Jonathan jumped up, too, and the gang’s attention was suddenly entirely on him. “What’s going on? What’s wrong with my Mom?”

“That’s Byers’s *kid*?” Dottie asked, shocked.

“He’s not a threat, leave him alone!” Nancy said quickly.

“Nancy!” Jonathan shouted. “What are you all *talking about*?”

They stared at him for a second, and then Axel said, “Holy shit, he really doesn’t know?”

“Doesn’t know what?” Even Nancy looked a bit confused.

“Your Mom-”

“Wait.” Nancy interrupted. “Kali just ran in there, does she think-”

“Of course she knows who’s in there!”

Nancy stared at him for a second, and then took off at a run.

Joyce was frozen, looking shocked and incredibly sad, as the kids kept their weapons raised, occasionally eying the windows and wondering if they could risk running for them. Finally, Hopper slowly stepped forwards, managing to get next to Joyce before the kids aimed at him, too. “Kids, kids, calm down.” Hopper said, sounding pretty confused. “It’s okay, we’re here to-”

“We *know* what you’re here for.” Mike said, his voice shaking slightly as he stared them down. “You let them take us, you’re here to take us back.”

“What?” Joyce’s face fell.

“Kids, we didn’t-” Hopper said.

“Don’t *lie* to us!” Max said, raising the bat again.

“We’ve been on the run for *days*,” Dustin shouted, “We’ve been through burning buildings and tunnels and a fucking *cult* trying to get to us, and...”

“Kids, please, listen.” Hopper said. “Let me just explain- Joyce, tell the teens it’s safe to get out of the car-”

“They took *Will*!” Mike shouted. “They took *Will* and you *let them*!”

“Children, I-” Joyce began.

“Don’t say anything!” Lucas shouted. “Just let us go!”

El, meanwhile, watched Joyce carefully, still keeping her knife at the ready, but looking a bit more sympathetic than the rest of the Party. Joyce met her eyes, and El, outside of the Party’s sight, lowered the knife. She didn’t *look* dangerous. She looked... sad.

“Children...” Joyce began. “Children, I’m so *sorry* this happened to you, but you *have* to listen-”

“No, no we *don’t*!” Mike shouted. “We don’t have to listen to *shit*!”

The door, which had swung shut behind the adults, suddenly burst open again, and the kids jumped instantly. Lucas almost fired off his wrist-rocket in shock, but stopped just in time.

Kali rushed in, stopping just past the doorway. She scanned the situation, her eyes narrowing as she spotted the adults.

“Kali!” El shouted, smiling a little.

“You’re Kali?” Joyce asked, turning around. “We’re friends of Na-”

In a flash, Kali whipped a gun out of her pocket, pointing it right at Joyce. Joyce and Dustin both let out shocked shouts, while Hopper pulled out his gun just as fast and had it on Kali.

“Whoa, whoa! Drop that.” Hopper said.

“Absolutely not.” Kali said, her voice growing cold. The kids all stared at her, shocked at how *angry* she looked. “Now step away from my sister and her friends.”

“We’re trying to *help* them.” Joyce said desperately.

“*Help them?*” Kali said darkly. “I don’t think so.”

“Put the gun down.” Hopper repeated. “Move it away from her, she’s done nothing-”

“Nothing?” Kali spat, still staring at Joyce. “I know who you are, and I know exactly what you’ve done, and I am *not* letting you anywhere near my sister.” She glanced towards the kid. “Jane, out the window. The gang’s outside.”

“No, don’t go!” Joyce said, trying to move.

“Take one more *fucking* step towards them and I’ll shoot you.” Kali said.

“I’m not letting anyone get hurt today.” Hopper said. “Put the gun *down* and we can talk this out.”

“I’m not *talking*-”

It was at that moment that someone new ran in. The kids could vaguely hear shouts from outside, but the teenager immediately analyzed the room and rushed to stand inbetween Kali and the adults, effectively blocking both guns.

“What the *hell*?” Kali looked pissed.

“Whoa, whoa!” the teenager said, raising her hands. “Everyone calm down! Everyone calm down! Kali, they’re with me, I *swear*, they’re safe. I’ve been with them almost a week, we’ve been tracking the kids, they are *not* dangerous!”

“Nancy, do you *know* who that is?” Kali asked, gesturing to Joyce, who looked frozen in place.

Mike suddenly dropped his flashlight, not that anyone aside from the Party noticed. They all glanced towards him, eyes wide, and El moved her free hand to grab his.

Nancy.

“Yes, yes, Lonnie Byers’s ex. Got that.” Nancy said sharply. They recognized her now, from the post office; she’d cut her hair since then. “But she’s done nothing to hurt anyone, she *just* wants her kid back.”

“Wait,” Max said, and everyone’s attention was directed towards her, as she lowered the bat slightly. “She... she wants Will back?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to say.” Joyce said, her voice breaking slightly. “I did *not* give VFD permission to take my son away, and I sure as hell didn’t know you all were targets for them.” She turned back to Kali, pleading with her eyes. “I left VFD over a decade ago, I’ve been trying to hide from them, from my past, for *so long*. I just want to help get these kids safe.”

Kali glanced towards Nancy again, still looking very suspicious, and Nancy said, “We broke into headquarters together. We got information on where Will should be. Just... both of you,” she glanced towards Hopper there, “Put the guns down.”

Slowly, very slowly, Kali lowered her weapon, and Hopper followed

suite, though both of them were eying each other warily.

Joyce turned back to the kids, once again pleading. “Kids, I am so *sorry* this happened to you. I’m so sorry you went through all of this. But I *promise*, I will help. I will get Will back and then I will help you find somewhere safe. I promise.”

They all stared at her, still incredibly wary, until El repeated, only just loud enough for everyone to hear, “Promise?”

Joyce nodded, though she looked a bit bewildered at this new girl.

The kids glanced towards each other, each silently asking each other the same thing: *Can we actually trust her?*

Lucas was the first to break. He turned back to Joyce, then threw his wrist rocket at the wall and rushed forwards, throwing his arms around her in a tight hug. Joyce hugged him back instantly, repeating how sorry she was. Max and Dustin moved next, almost simultaneously, dropping their weapons and rushing towards her. El also moved, but she ran to Kali, giving her a quick hug, before Kali glanced towards her leg and immediately knelt down to inspect it.

Mike, meanwhile, stayed put for a second, his eyes drifting towards the teenage girl. She was watching the hug for a second, but then she looked back at him, and their eyes met. They both recognized each other from the post office, yes. But now they both knew something else, they knew who they *were* .

They stared for what felt like forever, with Nancy opening and closing her mouth, struggling to form words. Mike didn’t move at all, just watched her warily. And then, slowly, he rushed over to Joyce, too.

Nancy jumped as he passed her, before shutting her eyes, clenching her fists, and looking to Kali. She said, “Um, Steve and Jonathan should be having a shouting match with your gang right now. We should... we should probably break that up.”

There was a bit of a pause, before Kali stood up and said, “Good idea.” she paused. “Who the fuck is Jonathan?”

39. The Gang tries to Plan a Rescue

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The Gang tries to Plan a Rescue

The cottage was a little crowded with everyone inside, but finally, everyone managed to sit in a nice circle on the floor as Kali's gang unloaded the stuff they'd been able to get out of the van before ditching it. The kids were all sitting together, almost on top of each other, but El, on the edge of the group, was pretty close to Kali, who was on the edge of her gang. Nancy and Steve bridged the gap between the Gang and their travel group, and Joyce sat closest to the children. Jonathan kept glancing between the Gang, Nancy, and his Mom, as if one of them might suddenly give him all the answers he wanted.

"So," Max finally said, "What are we going to do?"

They all glanced towards each other, and Kali said, "Well, first thing's first. How'd you steal a Volunteer firetruck?"

"Easy." Max said. "Knocked out a couple of people, stole the keys, drove through a fence."

"You drove through a fence?" Joyce asked, as if that was the only worrying part of that sentence.

"Listen," Max said, "I'm having period cramps and no medication, so I had to let my anger out somehow."

"How'd you know we weren't at the hideout?" Mike asked. "You guys got here pretty quick."

"Robin sent us a telegram," Kali said. "While we were trying to contact Nancy. Said she'd been compromised and the Volunteers were headed towards our hideout. We figured you'd be smart enough to get out, and if you weren't, we'd find out soon as we got to Stain'd and know where to look for you."

"Also, we'd already told Nancy where to go and had to meet her." Funshine shrugged.

"The Volunteers managed to spot us in the van, though," Dottie said bitterly, "So we had to ditch and take the train."

"Well," Nancy said, "We managed to get Will's location and burn a headquarters while we were there."

"Well, we didn't... *mean* to burn it." Jonathan muttered.

"*You* didn't." Nancy shrugged.

"Oh, speaking of which," Steve said, looking towards Kali, "We kinda figured out you were right and now we're on the run from VFD, too, so... there's that."

"Good." Kali replied. "So... who's this guy?"

"This is Hopper." Nancy said, gesturing towards the man. "He's a Cop, trying to find the kids, too."

"And how much does he know?"

"He's not gonna fuck us over." Nancy said.

"So," Max said, clapping her hands and raising her voice, "Now that introductions are over, *what the hell are we gonna do?*"

"I think we'll have more than enough people to get Will back." Joyce said. "In fact, it should be *way* easier than we think. If his mentors are who I think they are, they should be easy to get past. They're at the base of the Mortmain Mountains, which should be easy enough to get to, if we take the train."

"No!" all the of the kids said instantly, jumping.

When everyone looked at them worriedly, Dustin said, "We had to jump off one of those, not doing that again."

"You jumped off a *train?*" Joyce asked, eyes wide.

“Not fun.” Max said.

El shrugged. “A little fun.”

“Maybe for *you*.” Lucas groaned.

“We can’t just drive the firetruck.” Steve said. “Too obvious, it’ll get a ton of attention. And we can’t all fit in our car.”

“We can steal another vehicle or two.” Kali said.

Hopper put his palm on his forehead. “Please tell me you didn’t just say that.”

“You’re helping us fuck with a cult.” Dottie said. “We’re all vigilantes now.”

“I can drive one of the cars.” Max volunteered.

“Absolutely not.” said Hopper, Nancy, Jonathan, Funshine and Mick all at the same time.

“Once we get to the Mortmain Mountains,” Joyce said quickly, “Kids, you stay with Nancy, Steve and Hop. I’ll go in to get Will- Jonathan, you come, too, he might react better if you’re with me.” Jonathan nodded silently. “Uh... Kali, was it? You guys can either come with us to stake out the area or stay with the kids. Once we get Will out, we’re getting as far away from there as possible.”

“Do you have a designated safe place after that?” Kali asked.

“Not really.” Joyce admitted.

“We do.” Kali said. “We can take you there.”

“Uh, Ms. Byers?” Dustin asked. When Joyce nodded at him, he said, “Uh, what if... what if Will doesn’t wanna come? What if those fuckers got to him, what if...”

“Or what if he reacts like we did?” Max added. “What if he thinks you let them take him and he doesn’t want to go with you?”

“He...” Joyce paused, the potential problem hitting her at that moment.

Everyone glanced at each other, a little concerned, as El managed to slip away from the group and wander over to the gang’s belongings, rifling through the pile with a focused look. Mike and Kali glanced towards her, as Hopper said, “Maybe if one of the kids is with you.”

“I’m not taking a child into a VFD building with me.” Joyce said.

“We’ll go!” Mike said quickly. “We’ll go get Will!”

“No!” Joyce and Hopper both said.

“Come on, we’ve beat the shit outta Volunteers before.” Max said.
“We’ll do it again. And Will’ll trust us.”

“That is if he doesn’t start screaming the second someone breaks into his room.” Kali said. Everyone froze at that, and she said, “Don’t think I don’t know how *that* feels. That’s a paranoia you’ll all have for a *while* .”

“It’s not like we can get in contact with him.” Steve said.

El then walked right into the center of the circle and dropped something right in front of Joyce. They all jumped at the loud *clang* that sounded as the item hit the floor. Joyce realized what it was first, rushing forwards and grabbing it to drag it closer to her.

“Radio.” El said simply.

“Hey, that’s ours!” Axel said.

“Yeah, and we can’t use it much.” Mick said. “We don’t wanna get tracked or anything.”

“No, no, this is good.” Joyce said, immediately turning dials to change stations. “It’s not long range, but we’re close enough to the Mountains that we might be able to find a Station his guardians are tuned into, if we go up the hill a bit, maybe closer to the lighthouse.”

“And then what?” Mick said. “It’s not very likely he’ll be listening to

the radio.”

“At some point he will be.” Joyce said. “Radio training is required in apprenticeship, and even if he’s already gotten it... it’s worth a shot.”

“Which channel is he on?” Mike asked.

“We’ll have to guess.” Joyce replied. “If they haven’t changed channels since I’ve been a Volunteer, there should be a good three they could be using. I’ll carry the radio up to the lighthouse, who wants to come?”

Everyone stared at her, and she sighed. “Right. Stupid question. Hawkins Kids, Jonathan, Hop. Everyone else... do something, I guess.”

She lifted the radio, carrying it out the door as Jonathan rushed after her. Everyone stared at each other for a second, and then Lucas, Dustin, and Max rushed over to Hopper, asking him about the trip, and Mike said, “Uh, El, you stay here with Kal, cause... your leg, you know?”

“I can look that over.” Funshine said.

El hesitated, glancing between the kids. “Split up?”

“We’ll only be a little bit away.” Mike promised her, squeezing her hand. “We’ll be back before you know it. And we’re with Ms. Byers. She’s... she’s safe, if she really didn’t call VFD on us.”

El nodded slightly, and then said, “Don’t... be gone long.”

“Of course not.” Mike smiled at her, and then jumped up to follow Hopper and his friends. “See you soon!”

As he left, he passed Nancy again. He passed by, barely glancing in her direction, but she stared after him after he disappeared, watching him carefully.

“Now,” Kali said, bringing Nancy’s attention back to her, “When did you become friends with *Byers* ?”

“Mom!” Jonathan called, running to catch up with her. “Mom, wait!”

Joyce paused for a second, letting her son catch up, and said, “What is it?”

“Mom, I-” Jonathan glanced behind him, making sure that the kids were still inside the building, not caught up yet, and then said, “Kali’s Gang, they... they seemed scared of...”

“VFD is scary.” Joyce said sharply, moving up the path and glancing up to see how far away the lighthouse was. “And Stain’d certainly has its ghosts-”

“Mom, they were scared of *you*.”

Joyce stopped dead in her tracks, and she shut her eyes, gripping onto the radio until her knuckles turned white.

“Mom, why... why were they scared of you? What did you *do*?”

Joyce took a deep breath, and then said, “Volunteers... we often had to do very... *very* bad things. And we tried to justify it in our heads but... that didn’t make it right. And... I’m sorry, Jonathan, I just *can’t* talk about some of the things I did.”

Jonathan stared at her for a second, and then said, “Mom, did you and Dad... ever kill anyone?”

Joyce bit her lip, and nodded. “Almost every Volunteer has.” she whispered. “At some point. We were playing a dangerous game, one that neither side can win. I don’t think any of them realize that.”

“But... why are they so scared of *you*?”

“Because I did a lot of very terrible things while I was volunteering.” Joyce said. “Enough that a lot of people knew my name. Which made hiding a bit hard.” She took a deep breath, and then said, as they started to walk again, “I’m gonna ask again, do you remember anything from before we left?”

"I remember that Dad didn't like us leaving the house." Jonathan said quietly. "I don't remember him much, but I remember being scared a lot when he was around and when you were fighting. And..." he narrowed his eyes. "I think I remember people sometimes coming over, and you making me stay in my room. But that's about it."

Joyce sighed. "Those people... were not great. And they didn't like me much because I didn't agree with them."

"Were they arsonists?" Jonathan asked.

Joyce took a deep breath, and then said, "Yeah. I didn't... I was..." after a beat, she glanced back and saw that the kids and Hopper were heading towards them, so she started walking again, looking over to Jonathan. "I figured out we had to leave when... I was taking care of Will, and when I finally got him to sleep, I looked outside in the yard and... and your Father was showing you how to light a fire. You were lighting a fire and I *knew* if I tried to stop you Lonnie would get *pissed* and... and by this point none of the Volunteers knew where I was and... I knew your Father wanted to recruit you, sooner rather than later so he wouldn't have to deal with you. And... and it hit me right there, that I didn't *want* you recruited. I didn't want you to be taken away and raised to value knowledge or riches above your own life, and never see me again. So... I waited until Lonnie was on a mission, and then I called some old friends and stole their car."

She sighed. "And now Will's caught up in all of this, he was a *toddler* when this all went down, he shouldn't have any part of this. Neither of you should. But... we'll get him back, and then we won't have to deal with VFD again."

"And once we're safe..." Jonathan trailed off. "Would you be able to talk more about it?"

Joyce bit her lip. "I... I really don't know why you'd want to know."

"It's just... it's family history, you know? Just because it's not good doesn't mean we shouldn't know."

"I guess." Joyce sighed. "Once... once we're safe, I can probably tell you and Will some things. Both of you."

Jonathan stared at her for a second, and then said, “Alright.”

They kept walking, with the kids and Hopper trailing a few feet behind them, talking about how they stole the firetruck and how of *course* they knew it was illegal, but that didn’t mean shit when they were on the run and how Hopper had to stop being such a killjoy.

By the time they’d reached the top of the hill, the kids looked a bit tired, not that any of them were going to mention it. Joyce set up the radio, glancing towards the lighthouse on occasion to make sure nobody was going to come out of it and ask them what they were doing.

“What’ll we do if we contact Will?” Dustin asked.

“We can’t talk to him directly, and we sure as hell can’t put you kids on the line.” Joyce explained. “But we can send codes. What codes does he know? Morse? All Volunteers know that, that’s basically our first alphabet.”

“Maybe just a, ‘Cleric, stay in place.’” Mike suggested. “He’s our Cleric, he’ll know what that means. Do Volunteers play D&D?”

“Not that I’m aware of.” Joyce said.

“Jonathan should say it.” Lucas suggested, and when they turned to look at him, he explained, “Will’ll know his voice, the Volunteers probably won’t. He’d know Hopper, sure, but not as well as he’d know his own brother.”

Joyce turned towards Jonathan and said, “Would you... be willing to do that?”

“Of course.” Jonathan said instantly. “Of course, what do you want me to say again?”

Mike paused, and then said, “Cleric, stay in place. The Party is coming.”

Joyce moved the radio dials, and then stepped back. Jonathan

paused, waiting to see if anyone else was sending signals, and then pressed a few buttons, and said, "Cleric, stay in place. The Party is coming." He waited a minute, and then repeated himself a few times.

"Okay, let's try the second station." Joyce said, bending down to move the dials a bit. Then she stepped back, and Jonathan kept repeating, "Cleric, stay in place. The Party is coming. Cleric, stay in place. The Party is coming. Cleric..."

He kept going a bit longer this time, and when Joyce started to move the dials, Dustin said, "This is hopeless, isn't it?"

"No, it's *not*!" Lucas snapped.

"What are the fucking chances that Will has a radio he's listening to right now?" Dustin asked.

"Better than you'd think." Joyce said. "Mountain studies tend to start very early, but not this early. If he's got the radio on- okay, Jonathan send the message."

Jonathan sighed, pressed some buttons, and began, "Cleric, st-"

"Darling, you got to let me know..."

Everyone completely froze over.

"Should I stay or should I go?"

"If you say that you are mine, I'll be here til the end of time."

"Oh my God." Joyce's voice broke, and her covered her mouth with her hands.

"Is that..." Max began, but she didn't need to finish. They all knew who it was.

"So you got to let me know... should I stay or should I go?"

"He didn't give up on us." Mike said, almost disbelievingly. "He's calling us."

“Talk back to him.” Hopper said.

“What if there’s people with him?” Lucas asked.

“If he’s sending out a message, nobody’s with him.” Mike replied.

Jonathan stayed silent for a second, and then pressed the buttons again, and started to sing himself. *“Should I stay or should I go now? Should I stay or should I go now?”*

There was a beat, and they wondered if maybe the message hadn’t gone through. Then they heard Will’s voice again. *“If I go, there will be trouble. And if I stay it will be double.”*

“So come on and let me know...” Jonathan replied, staring at the radio, his voice breaking slightly.

Then they heard a quiet, “Well? Should I stay or should I go?”

Jonathan took a deep breath, and said, “Cleric, stay in place. The Party is coming.”

“The... the Party is coming?” there was a tinge of hope in Will’s voice.

“The Party is coming.” Jonathan repeated, and then, after a second, he added, “Nobody wanted you lost. We’re retrieving you.”

There was a bit of a silence, before Will said, “I will change stations Wednesday night.”

“What does that mean?” Max asked.

“Change stations?” Lucas narrowed his eyes.

Hopper was the one who figured it out first. “They’re moving him. Taking him somewhere else.”

“We’ll definitely be there before Wednesday night, if we move now.” Joyce said.

Jonathan sent another message. “Not an issue. The Party is coming.”

“We’ll have to go get everyone else.” Joyce muttered. “Move immediately. We should be there by tonight, way before they try to take him away.”

“Do we have to go?” Dustin asked, staring at the radio as if it was his lifeblood; the rest of the kids had similar looks.

“We can’t just sit here and talk to him if we want to get him back.” Hopper explained.

The Party all slowly nodded, and Jonathan sent, “Message is over. The Party will come soon.”

Will replied, “I’ll be prepared.”

And then they turned the radio off and raced back to the cottage.

40. One Last Car Trip, I Swear

CHAPTER FORTY

One Last Car Trip, I Swear

“We’ve got our cars.” Dottie said, grinning as she walked back into the cottage.

“Legally?” Hopper asked, and Dottie just laughed in response. He sighed, “Alright, then, let’s move out. Kids, get your stuff in one of the cars- you might have to split, so make your peace with that now. Joyce, can you help the Gang with their shit while I start the van?”

Joyce nodded, and Kali said, “I’ll stick with her.” She still had a hint of suspicion in her voice, looking very much like she didn’t want to leave her alone for long.

“Someone should go through the Firetruck.” Funshine suggested. “In case the Volunteers have something in there.”

“I can do that.” Nancy said, and then she looked pointedly towards Mike. “You, kid. Come help me.”

Mike froze for a second, glancing towards the kids. Max finally said, “Uh, didn’t you try to set us on fire a week ago?”

“Not you specifically.” Nancy said.

Mike paused, and then said, “Uh... okay. I-I guess.”

“Alright, everyone else, let’s go.” Hopper said. “We need to get there before Will’s abductors realize he’s contacted us.”

“So,” Kali said, crossing her arms while Joyce went over the bag

inventory, “You actually left?”

Joyce hesitated, before saying, “Yes.”

“So, what? Realized you’d been-”

“I realized things went to shit before I was even born, realized I’d done some pretty fucked up things, and realized I didn’t want my boys dealing with all of this.” Joyce cut her off. “Guess that last one didn’t work out, did it?”

“And you ran away?”

“Yep.” Joyce said. “Thought I’d found a safe place to hide, I’d heard that Volunteers were supposed to have evacuated the town. Apparently I was *wrong*.”

Kali paused, and then said, “Happened to me, too. Thought I’d found a quiet town.”

“And then?”

“The arsonists found me.” Kali said bitterly. “But I’m still fighting. Taking down headquarters for both sides.”

“They’ll always make more headquarters, more safe places.” Joyce said. “The best thing to do is to find someplace loud enough that they won’t try to make it quiet until we’ve gotten far enough away.”

“Or,” Kali said carefully, “We could threaten them with something they love. Strike a bargain, maybe.”

Joyce froze for a second, and then she said, “You don’t... you don’t have *it*, do you?”

Kali bit her lip, and then said, “Wow. You’re just as perceptive as I was warned you were.”

“It’s *here*?”

“No. With an ally.” Kali said. “We’re hoping to keep it with us as leverage.”

“Then they’ll kill you and take the bowl.”

“That’s why it’s not with us.”

The two stared at each other for a second, and then Joyce said, “I suppose you’ve seen the inside?”

“Have you?”

“Yes, actually.” When Kali looked at her in surprise, Joyce said, “When I was a teenager, I found it in a Volunteer’s safe. Knew what it was instantly, and when I... well, you know that everybody used to be told what was in it.”

“Rite of passage or some shit.” Kali snorted.

“But that got lost with the schism.” Joyce said. “Along with common fucking decency, apparently.”

“VFD was shit even before the schism.”

Joyce sighed. “Probably was.” She looked at Kali, and then said, “You... you can’t be much older than Jonathan, can you?”

“I suppose not.” Kali said.

Joyce looked at her sadly, and then said, “You know... when we find somewhere safe, you and your Gang are welcome to stay with us.”

“That’s nice. But I want VFD *gone*, not just from our lives, but from everyone’s.”

“It’s a lot more complicated than just killing them all. You have to kill the ideology, something that doesn’t work if you’re on the outside, like we have to be.”

Kali stared at her for a second, and then said, “You really aren’t working for them anymore.”

“I’ve changed a lot since my younger years.”

“Well... good for you, then.”

Then Kali picked up some bags and started carrying them out in silence.

“Uh, not seeing anything here.” Mike said awkwardly.

Nancy lifted up a seat cushion, pulling out a few coins. “Damn.” she said quietly. “Thought there’d be some secret files conveniently stashed here, huh?”

“Yeah, we should probably get back.” Mike said, biting his lip and glancing towards the doors of the truck. “We wanna get to Will before-”

“Listen, Mike...” Nancy said carefully, waiting until Mike slowly turned towards her before saying, “I... I know you probably don’t know who I...”

“No. I do.” Mike said blankly. “Kali told me.”

“Oh.” Nancy said, sounding surprised. “Oh, I... well, uh...” She stumbled a little, and then said, “Listen, I... I don’t know much about being a sister-”

“Did you know we have another sister?” Mike asked blankly. Nancy jumped a little, as he said, “Her name’s Holly. She’s four. She likes coloring and climbing on things.”

Nancy paused. “Um... that’s...”

“I don’t know what’s going on with her.” Mike said. “I don’t know if VFD has her or if she’s being ignored, if she knows or cares where I am, what everyone’s told her... did you know our parents are probably in VFD?”

“Our Mom.” Nancy said softly. Mike stared at her for a second, and she said, “Mike, I... you were two when I was recruited, I remember you... I remember you just... wandering around. You liked when I read to you, you liked to follow...”

“I don’t remember you at all.” Mike interrupted, glancing away from

her, his voice breaking slightly. "I don't remember anything about you. I didn't even know I had a sister until someone told me. I didn't know your name until Kali told me she worked with you."

"Mom didn't-"

"No. They didn't like to talk about you. And they won't talk about me, either. I bet Holly won't even remember she has a brother, let alone a sister."

"Mike-"

"Did you think about me?" Mike asked, finally turning towards her, trying to hide the tears. "At all? Or were you just focused on setting shit on fire?"

"I turned to the arsonists because I had nowhere else to go." Nancy said sharply. "The Volunteers killed the only person who cared about me, I had to-"

"Do you know what?" Mike snapped. "When I heard my sister was nearby, I thought we'd be able to connect, you know? Thought I'd see you and 'this is your sister, go hug her' fireworks would go off. But I saw you and I just... I panicked for a second, remembering you as the girl who set a post office on fire. And when Kal said your name, I just... didn't feel *anything*. Because I don't know you. I don't know *anything* about you. We don't have this magical family connection or anything, we just happen to have the same parents."

Nancy stared at him, wide-eyed, and Mike suddenly realized how harsh that had sounded. How she looked like she *did* want to connect. But what was he supposed to do? Lie? Say he remembered her reading to him when he didn't even know her name until a few days ago?

"We just have the same parents." Mike said, more softly. "Did Dad ignore you, too? Did he just not care about anything you did until Mom made him? Did Mom say you could tell her anything but not mean it?"

"Mike..."

“And Mom just let them take us.” Mike was clearly crying now. “She was totally fine with handing us over to a cult, with making sure we didn’t ever know each other...”

“Mike.” Nancy said, and as he turned to her, she said, “Mike, I... I remember you. Barely. I... I can’t even remember what Mom and Dad look like anymore. If they walked in right now, I’m not even sure I’d know who they were.”

They stared at each other for a bit, and then Mike said, “Well, I guess there’s one thing we can bond over. Forgetting family.”

“VFD fucked us both over in pretty different ways.” Nancy said.

The two siblings stared at each other for a second, and then Mike wiped his eyes on his sleeve and said, “I better get back to my friends. I... I don’t like being away from them for too long.”

“Yeah. I should make sure Steve and Jonathan and Kali are...” Nancy said.

They looked at each other again for a long moment, and then Mike rushed towards her and threw his arms around her, sobbing into her shirt.

Nancy froze for a long while, not sure what was going on, and then she hugged him back.

Joyce and Hopper took the teens in their car again, while Kali’s Gang had their own car, and Kali volunteered to drive the kids in the van they’d “borrowed” from a used car lot. Max sat up front, filling Kali in on everything she’d missed, as the rest of them stared out the windows and tried to think of something to do. Mike practiced codes in his notebook for a while, Lucas kept pulling the string of his wrist rocket, and El let Dustin play with her spyglass for a bit.

They drove all day, only stopping for gas every few hours. Max passed out the snack bags they’d stolen from the library around noon, and eventually Mike said, “Can you, like, turn on the radio or something? It’s getting boring.”

"Oh, sorry that our mission to infiltrate a VFD house and rescue a kidnapped child is boring." Kali said stiffly.

"It wouldn't kill you to turn on a radio." Lucas said.

"Alright." Kali rolled her eyes. "But we're not listening to the new, tacky shit."

"Deal."

It was almost dark by the time Kali finally got to turn the music down, and said, "We're almost there. I don't know where the safehouse is, we're just following Byers's car now."

"Speaking of which," Dustin said, "What exactly did she *do* to tick you off so much?"

"She was with VFD." Kali said.

"You looked really pissed when she showed up, though." Max said. "Do you know her?"

"By name." Kali said. "And her husband."

"You know Will's Dad?" Mike asked, shocked.

"I know *of* him." Kali said. "He's with the arsonists."

"Oh, wonderful." Dustin said.

"Makes sense why Ms. Byers'd leave." Lucas said.

"Well, that all depends on..." Kali then trailed off, and her eyes went wide. Max followed her gaze, and then slowly reached to shut the radio off.

"Oh, shit." Max said.

"What?" asked Dustin, who couldn't see out the window; the other two cars had parked in front of them, and they couldn't see anything else over the glass.

"Please tell me that's not..." Max said.

Lucas jumped out of his seat, throwing the car door open, and he rushed out to see what had caused everyone to stop, followed closely by Dustin, Mike and El.

When they all saw what was up ahead, Lucas and Dustin both stepped back, shocked, and El instantly grabbed onto Mike's arm, as Mike said, "Fuck."

In front of the cars, just a little ways away, was the charred remains of a house.

41. Will's Rebellious Phase kicks in at the Exact Wrong Time

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Will's Rebellious Phase kicks in at the Exact Wrong Time

Will turned off his radio, shoved it in his drawer, and then screamed into his pillow, barely able to contain his grin.

They were coming. They were coming. They were coming!

He hadn't thought the radio would work, thought it was a foolish hope. He was about to give up. But he was wrong, he was *so* wrong. They'd heard him, they'd heard the radio, and they were *coming for him*.

He had to be ready, he didn't know how long it would take them to get there. He threw his jacket on, shoving his new commonplace book into one pocket. He considered grabbing the radio, too, but he didn't want M and G to spot him with that, so he left it in the room, just in case. Besides, if the Party was coming for him, he wouldn't need the radio, would he?

He didn't have anything else with him, so he just buttoned his jacket and sat on the bed for a second, positively buzzing.

His friends were coming, and Jonathan, and probably his Mom, too. And he wouldn't have to see G again, he wouldn't have to spend all day doing weird things because they told him to, he wouldn't constantly be in fear that he was going to be moved and thrown from place to place and possibly given to a chaperone worse than the other ones.

After a few minutes, he managed to calm himself down enough to figure out how to control his face, how to make it blank and passive like he'd been trying to be the last few days. He couldn't let the chaperones know that someone was coming for him, he just *couldn't*,

they'd move him somewhere else and his friends would have to start all over.

He slowly got up and moved into the kitchen, where M had left out a piece of toast and cup of tea for him. She was standing near the far wall with G, putting colored pins in a map taped in front of them and trying to distinguish something. Will ate in silence, wondering how long it would take for their concentration to break and for them to realize he was there. He'd already finished eating by the time M turned around and said, "Oh, Byers! We're not traveling to the mountain today, we have some passages for you to translate."

"Okay." Will said, trying not to sound too excited. Though, well, he *did* massively prefer translating codes to hiking up mountains and investigating the wildlife.

"This doesn't make sense." G muttered, still focused on the map. "Look, the arson from the other day isn't close enough to the last sighting of—"

"G, tell me later." M rolled her eyes.

"No, it's fine." Will said, probably a little too quickly. "I don't know what you're talking about anyway."

G shot him a suspicious glare, while M said, "Well, we'd prefer not to discuss such things in front of children."

"If you say so." Will replied.

Was he being too compliant? Maybe they'd suspect that. Well, M didn't seem to. She just nodded at him and said, "I'll go get your passages, Byers. You can work in the living room."

"Uh... okay." Will said, suddenly very keenly aware of how every word sounded coming out of his mouth. How uncomfortable had he sounded before? Would they get suspicious if he played along too much? He couldn't very well be really rebellious, they'd just lock him up somewhere, which would make it harder for his family to find him. "Are you sure I can't do it in here?"

"G and I have some stuff to do." M explained, glancing towards the

map. "And we'll need to telegram our superiors as soon as possible..."

"Could I help?" Will asked.

"Why would you want to help?" G asked, still glaring at Will.

Will struggled not to shiver; G still gave him a *very* bad feeling. "More interesting than coding." he said.

"Once again, Byers," M said, a little more sternly, "This is something we wouldn't like to discuss around children."

"Why-?"

That was when the doorbell rang.

Will froze up instantly, panic setting in. Was that his family- his *Mom*? Would they be stupid enough to just show up at the door and expect him back? Were they sending a distraction and planning to sneak him out the back? Was that even them at all? Maybe it was more Volunteers, come to take him away again.

"Ugh, I'll go see who that is." M sighed. "Probably some more makeup ladies or something." She reached into a drawer, pulled out a book, and dumped it in front of Will. "Here's *Ivanhoe*, try to translate a bit into Polybius before I get back."

Will nodded numbly, slowly reaching into his pocket to find his commonplace book as M passed by him, muttering something to herself. He'd only just flipped open a couple of pages, however, when G walked forwards and sat across from him.

Will tried to ignore him at first, but G said, "Are you hiding something, Byers?"

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit. He was really bad at this.

"Everyone's hiding something." was the first reply he thought of. "You and M hide things all the time."

"You're very interested in what we're doing all of the sudden."

"It's more interesting than the random tasks you've given me." Will said. "Besides, I like puzzles."

G was silent for a second, and then he said, "Do you know who's at the door?"

Shit shit shit SHIT SHIT SHIT.

"What?" That was probably the wrong things to say. "What? Why would I- I'm going to go see M."

Will started to stand up, only for G to reach out and grab his arm, causing him to freeze up again. Will bit his lip, struggling to keep breathing normally; he didn't like having his arm grabbed like that, he didn't like it *at all* , and G was gripping it *hard* .

"You know we were very hesitant about taking you, Byers." G said, sounding eerily calm. "Since both your parents caused some massive problems for us. We figured you and your brother might be the same way. But you seemed a lot quieter, calmer. You would make a good recruit, a good Volunteer. You *could* help the world stay quiet."

Help the world stay quiet. He'd heard that phrase quite a bit. Will stared ahead, blankly focusing on the wall, trying to focus on *anything* but the hand grabbing onto him.

"But you're being difficult. You don't want to be difficult, it just causes problems for all of us."

He wanted to hide, he really wanted to go shrink in the corner and write his codes and not bother anybody.

"Just shut up and be a good apprentice, and nothing will happen to you. And good apprentices tell their superiors what they want to know."

Where was M? She'd stop G... or would she? She'd never done anything about G before now. She might just let this happen. The other chaperones didn't seem to mind stuff like this.

"So, who is at the door?"

Who is at the...

If it was who he thought it was, G couldn't know. Will didn't know or care what he'd do to him, but if he tried to do something to his friends or family, Will didn't know if he could handle that. If it *wasn't* them at the door, Will wasn't about to give away his only hope of escape.

That was something he hadn't had yesterday. He hadn't had enough hope to fight back.

Will locked eyes with G, and said, as harshly as he could, "Let go!"

He pushed himself back, and G, looking very pissed, threw his arm down. Will lost balance and toppled backwards, crashing into a counter. He heard a vague ringing in his ears, and pain suddenly flashed in his head and back. He struggled to breathe for a second, trying to scramble to his feet but only succeeding in making his feet slide on the floor. He felt a foreboding panic, and he rolled, trying to put as much space as he could between him and G, who just stood there, watching him with some sort of anger behind his gaze.

Before anything more could happen, though, M rushed in, barely reacting to the situation, and yelling, "We have to leave *now!*"

"What?" G asked, though he turned and rushed to rip the map off of the wall. "What's going on?"

"We have to get out of here, we have enemies at the door." M explained, as Will finally managed to scramble to his feet, still breathing hard, staring at nothing and gripping the counter until his knuckles were white. "Come on, there's a tunnel at the far end of the house, we go down there and we can be in our next town by morning."

No.

"Byers, come on." M said.

Will turned, staring at her, and he suddenly felt something even more motivating than hope.

He felt cold fury.

“We’ve got to get a move on...”

“No!” Will yelled, and before M could even react, he ran forwards, ducked under her arm, and raced out.

He couldn’t go straight for the door, he knew that. They’d expect him to go that way, and they could catch up to him in the hall. So he doubled back as he heard M call out and G let out a frustrated yell, and raced towards his room, pushing open the door and grabbing a chair, shoving it under the knob before throwing the drawer open, scrambling through his belongings and fumbling with the radio before managing to shove it in his pocket. He then turned to the window, intending to climb out that way and make a run for town; some people who’d seen him buying supplies with G had given them very suspicious glances, one of them could probably help if he admitted he’d been kidnapped.

But as he turned, he realized the window had been smashed open. How long ago had...

Something was thrown in through the window, and then Will saw flames rise up from the ground.

Oh, fuck.

His family wasn’t who was here.

Will ripped the chair away from the door and threw it open, waiting for a second to hear where M and G’s yells were coming from, and then he rushed in the other direction, racing down the halls of the house, his legs feeling like lead and his head still pounding. He had to get away, he had to get away, he had to get away ...

He turned a bend, and instantly screamed.

He’d almost run right into the flames.

Will stepped back, breathing hard, stunned at how close he’d come to being burned. The fire was in front of him now, and he found himself stopping for a second, watching the flames creep closer and closer.

He knew that he had to run, he had to move before they reached him... but at the same time, the flickering light was *very* pretty...

Will shook his head, breaking the short trance, fear taking over as he remembered the last time he saw a fire- the time he'd been captured. He turned, trying to move, only to run right into M, who grabbed his arm before he could move away again.

"Come on, Byers, we have to go! G is *pissed*, just-"

"No, *no!*" Will yelled, struggling to break away from her even as they ran. "Let me go! *Let me go!*"

"Stop being *difficult*."

"*Let me go!*"

They turned the wrong bend, then, and a door burst open in front of them. Will froze in place as two people dressed in black rushed out and suddenly grabbed him, ripping him away from M. He kept screaming, as M started to yell, and more people ran out from the room, holding her back as Will was dragged in through the door, still kicking and screeching.

There were more people, dressed in black, inside the room, all glaring at him and throwing things to each other. They looked like the boxes that M and G shoved things in, but Will wasn't paying much attention to that. He was paying much more attention to the fact that two strange arsonists had grabbed him and were dragging him off. He kept screaming, leaning to try and maybe bite their hands or something, but then he was thrown at another arsonist, one he didn't get a good look at before he was spun around and grabbed again.

"Let me go! Let me go!" Will screamed again, trying to kick.

"Shut *up*, kid." said the person holding him, and Will suddenly felt very, very sick, and he didn't know why.

He paused for a second, desperately trying to hold back his terror, and then the door opened again, and more Firestarters ran in, dragging M and G with them. They turned towards a man who stood

next to the window, silently surveying. One Arsonist gestured towards M and G. "What do we do with them?"

The man, the one who must have been in charge, looked at them for a second, and then said simply, "Brenner said that we only need the boy."

Will's eyes widened, sudden horror gripping him, and then he started screaming again.

"God, can someone shut him up?" one of the arsonists groaned.

"He'll quiet soon enough." the leader said. "Get him out of the house before he burns."

As Will was dragged out again, still kicking and starting to sob, he heard one last order, called out after them.

"And contact Byers, tell him we're on our way, and we have his damn kid."

42. Joyce Gets Pissed

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Joyce Gets Pissed

Joyce walked into the rubble. She was eerily silent, strolling through the remains of the house; the walls had fallen, only a few support beams were still standing, and the roof had completely caved. She was basically walking through a pile of ash and wood.

Then, after a second, she turned towards the rest of the group, who had exited the cars and were standing just outside the rubble, watching in silent horror.

She stared at them, and then said, “Dig through it.”

“What?” Max asked.

“Dig.” Joyce said. “We need to see if there are bodies.”

They all flinched, and Jonathan said, “Mom, please tell me-”

“Jonathan.” Joyce seemed creepily confident, as if this was a routine she was used to. “I promise you, there’s a very good chance that Will is not here. But we have to make sure. Dig through until you find a body.”

They all looked to each other, and El moved forwards first, going to kick aside some fallen wood. Kali moved next, and then Hopper, and soon they all were silently picking apart the ruins of what used to be a VFD safe house.

The kids all stuck together, trying to swallow their fear that they’d find a small, burned body that they’d recognize. El seemed to be very sure what she was doing, much like Joyce, so they mostly followed her and dug through the rubble she turned over. Kali went with her gang to lift the heavier remains, while Joyce and Hopper dug through ash, and Nancy, Steve and Jonathan ducked under support beams

and parts of the roof.

“Do you think...” Max asked quietly. “Do you think it was the Firestarters?”

“Who else could it be?” Dustin asked.

“Do you think they...” Max took a deep breath, sitting down on a piece of wood for a second and grabbing at her stomach, which was still hurting her a lot. “Do you think they took him?”

“Well...” Mike sighed, biting his lip as El turned towards them, a sad look in her eyes, “The alternative is...”

Suddenly, they heard Jonathan scream, and they whipped around to see he and Nancy had overturned a piece of the roof, and apparently founding something underneath. Nancy looked almost unfazed, while Jonathan stepped back, covering his mouth with his hands and biting back another yell.

Everyone else rushed over, staring down, and after seeing the two corpses the teens had unearthed, Max stepped back, shutting her eyes and burying her face in Lucas’s arm, Dustin let out a string of curse words, and Mike threw a hand over his mouth, an overwhelming desire to puke coming over him.

Joyce slowly knelt in front of the bodies, barely fazed by how horrifying they looked. She took a deep breath, and then said, “Volunteers.”

She stood up, glanced at the others, and continued, “This was definitely an arsonist attack. And Will would’ve been with his chaperones if the house was on fire. Meaning...”

“They have him?” Nancy asked, eyes wide.

Joyce narrowed her eyes, some kind of fury radiating off of her. Before she could answer, however, they all heard the sound of a car driving up towards them. “Shit.” Axel muttered, as they saw what looked like a police car.

The kids all ducked behind the nearest adults- who happened to be

Kali and Nancy- and peered around, with El looking the most fearful. Kali moved her hand to grip onto her sister's, her eyes suddenly betraying her terror. Mike suddenly remembered what El had said earlier, that the police had brought Kali back to the arsonists. Slowly, he also grabbed onto Nancy's arm, backing up slightly. Nancy jumped, but held out her arms to block the kids from view.

"Be careful." Dustin warned, as the car parked near them. "El says VFD's in the-"

"Law enforcement?" Joyce glanced towards them, still looking very pissed. "Yeah. Got that."

She moved to the front of the group and crossed her arms as what must have been the town's Sheriff exited the car, saying, "You can't be here!"

"What *happened*?" Joyce asked, stepping forwards slightly.

"This is a crime scene, ma'am, you all have to-"

"Listen!" Joyce yelled, still walking closer, "We *need* to know what happened!"

Mike noticed first that Kali and El were gripping each others' hands too tight, both looking paralyzed, and he slowly said, "Do you two want to go wait in the car?"

"Yes." they both said.

"Go on, we'll catch up." he said, watching as Joyce continued to argue with the officer, trying to get any information; Hopper moved to join her, as Kali and El slowly moved away, jumping into the back of the Gang's van, the closest vehicle.

"Do you think he's with VFD?" Max asked quietly.

"Probably not, but you never know." Nancy replied. "If he is... well, I won't let them take you. Promise."

The two sisters sat in the back of the van, with Kali compulsively flipping a stick she'd grabbed off of the ground in her hands. El just curled up, staring at the wall. After a minute, though, she moved over to the radio, playing with the dials a bit.

After a minute, she said, "What was the channel with Will?"

Kali paused, then stumbled out her answer. As El changed the station, Kali said, "He won't have a radio."

"He could find one." El replied. "Our side had some."

"That's true." Kali said. "But he could be out of range."

El shook her head. "He called us this morning. They can't have gone far."

"In that case, they could still be traveling."

"It doesn't hurt to try."

"Sometimes it does." Kali sighed, curling up slightly. El sat at the radio, listening to the silence, and they stayed there for several minutes.

"God, okay, listen." the cop said, glancing curiously towards the large group before turning back to Joyce, "I don't know where this missing kid is, or his 'chaperones' or whatever the hell they were. I just know that this morning, I got about a dozen calls telling me that the house at the edge of town was on fire. By the time the official fire department got here, it was basically gone."

"The official fire department?" Joyce asked harshly. "What about the volunteer fire department?"

The cop blinked in confusion. "The what?"

"You haven't got one of those?" Hopper asked.

"Fraid not."

“So do you know who did it?” Joyce asked.

“No, of course-”

“Did you see,” Hopper asked carefully, “Any long, black cars leaving town?”

The officer paused. “What? Yeah, yeah, someone called that in, said that it was driving too fast...”

Joyce and Hopper looked at each other, and then Joyce said, “Where was it headed?”

“Off the mountain, into the woods.”

Joyce paused. “Now what’s in the direction of...” her eyes suddenly widened, and she stared into space for a second. Then she let out an angry screech, shut her eyes and kicked a nearby pile of garbage, yelling, “Son of a *bitch* !”

Over in the group, the kids all jumped and stared, wide-eyed, while the teenagers stared in shock and Jonathan rushed forwards. “Mom!” he called, sliding next to her. “Mom, what-”

“Son of a *bitch*! I bet he thought this would be fun! I bet this was a *game* to him! A game that *destroyed* our goddamn lives!”

“Mom!” Jonathan grabbed Joyce’s arm, spinning her towards him as Hopper hastily told the cop they’d be out soon. “Mom, what are you talking about?”

“The woods.” Joyce said, looking more angry than Jonathan had ever seen her. “That road leads one way, to the closest HQ, but not for the Volunteers. And you wanna know who we just found out is stationed there?”

“Stationed?” Jonathan asked. Then it suddenly hit Jonathan what she was saying, and he froze. “Are... Mom, please tell me you’re not saying...”

“Your father has Will.”

“Do you think they’re done?” Kali asked carefully.

They’d been in the car a while, with the radio silently buzzing beside them.

“Mike will come get us.” El said confidently. “When they’re done.”

“You really love those kids, don’t you?”

“My friends.” El smiled.

“They helped you escape?”

“I helped them, they helped me.” El smiled slightly.

“Sounds like my friends.”

“We both have gangs.”

Kali snorted slightly. “You’re not quite a gang yet.”

“Why not?”

“Gangs are... a bit violent.”

“Max is a bit violent.” El shrugged. “When she has cramps.”

“Oh, I know the feeling.” Kali sighed, and then said, “Jane, you know we’ll have to fight the Firestarters. For the Byers boy.”

El bit her lip and nodded.

“But, hey, good for us. We can kill everyone who ever hurt us.”

El flinched, and then said, “Papa?”

Kali froze. “Is he... still around?”

El nodded, curling up a bit more. “He’s probably mad.”

“Good.” Kali said, and she reached over to grab her sister’s hand.

“Jane, listen to me. He doesn’t own you, he doesn’t control you. You’re more powerful than he will ever be. And he doesn’t love you. He’s a monster, but you don’t have to fear him.”

El stared at her, eyes damp, and then she said, “Kal-”

And then the radio buzzed.

“Is anybody here? *Anybody?*”

They didn’t recognize the voice, but it sounded like a young boy.

They turned to stare at each other, and then Kali said, “I’ll get Joyce. Keep him talking.”

She burst out of the car, while El rushed to the radio, pressing the button to send a message. “Is this Will Byers?”

“Yes! Yes, thank God... who are you? Where’s-”

“Your family is coming.” El said. “They’re coming to the radio soon.”

“Who *are* you?”

“This is...” she paused. She didn’t want to use Papa’s last name, she’d have to use a fake one... and she couldn’t use her real first name, just in case someone else was listening, or this wasn’t Will at all. So she’d have to go with her fake one.

Although, to be honest, she was beginning to like the fake one more and more.

“This is El Prasad.” she said. “Where are you?”

43. Will's Awkward Family Reunion

Notes for the Chapter:

Next up on "Midas doesn't know how to physics"

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Will's Awkward Family Reunion

Will woke up in a room so dark he could barely see in front of him. He sat up, curling in on himself and trying to stay calm. He remembered being dragged from the fire, hearing the gunshots, being thrown into the black car again- he thought the hysterical screaming and sobbing might've begun then, but he wasn't sure, it was all a blur. And he remembered something being shoved over his mouth that effectively knocked him out.

And now he was here, and he was terrified.

He was sitting alone for what must have been an hour, and when he finally stood up to figure out the room he was in, he realized it was a lot smaller than he initially thought. A bench was spread across one wall, and the room contained absolutely nothing else. He also noticed that his jacket was gone, as well as the commonplace book and radio that had been inside. That figured, of course they'd want to make sure he couldn't call for help.

He listened at the door for a bit, which took a while to find, seeing as there wasn't even a handle inside. He heard nothing on the other side of the door, so he just went and sat on the bench, hugging his knees and rocking back and forth. He found that swaying usually helped calm him down, but right now he didn't feel very calm at all.

There were three thoughts that were really circling his head at the moment. The first being, *I told the Party I'd stay put. They don't know where I am.* The second being, *I've been captured by the Firestarters.* The third, *M and G are dead and it's all my fault.*

He finally heard loud footsteps in the hall, and he scrambled to sit up, staring in terror at the door. He heard the steps stop, heard a key turning the lock, heard the doorknob turn. And, slowly, Will started to shake. He had a *horrible* feeling about whoever was on the other side of the door, and he really didn't want to know what the arsonists had planned for him.

The man entered, holding out a lantern that finally managed to bathe the room in some light. Will blinked, readjusting his vision, as the man closed the door, walked over, and sat on the bench, placing the lantern between them.

He stared at Will for a second, and Will scanned him briefly, not wanting to make small talk or eye contact. Slowly, the man reached forwards, placing his hand under Will's chin and almost forcefully turning his head towards him, so he had to stare him in the face.

Then, almost calmly, the man said, "You look like your Mother."

That was when Will realized who the man was, and he felt himself start to quietly cry.

"Don't do that, kid." his Father said coldly. "We heard went through three Chaperones and a Headquarters before they got a handle on you."

"Four." Will's answer could easily be mistaken as a shaky breath, he said it so quietly. "Four Chaperones. There were twins."

"Even more impressive." he said. "You would be a good addition to the Phoenix program, but you might be a bit old for that now, blame your Mother for that. If Brenner doesn't like you, though, we can still continue your training. The right way."

"Right way?" Will asked hesitantly. "You guys... you burn things."

"The Volunteers burn things, too. They destroy just as much as we do. They just pretend they don't."

"That doesn't make you right." Will said, before he could think to stop himself.

"We are right." Lonnie said. "We're taking back our freedom, our property, our secrets. Volunteers won't let you have anything."

"Why don't you just *leave*?"

"I just said, kid. We have secrets to keep. Stuff the world wouldn't understand."

"Why not?"

"You ask too many questions." he coldly said. "You're gonna want to stop that."

Will was feeling a bit braver, sitting up a little. "I don't want to."

He flinched back a bit when his Dad gave him a dark glare. "It doesn't matter what you want. You're with us now."

"I want to go *home*."

"That's not a choice anymore." Will could tell his Dad was getting pissed, and all of his instincts were telling him to shut up and play along. But he didn't want to, he didn't want to be an arsonist, he wanted his family to find him and take him home.

Lonnie glared at him, and then said, "You're staying with us whether you like it or not. You're valuable to us, kid. Brenner's real interested in these things you can apparently do."

He wasn't stupid enough to tell his Dad that he had contacted somebody, he new way better than that. But he did glare at his Dad and say, "I'll get out. And I'll find somewhere to go, and I'll find my friends."

"What, the other Hawkins kids? You think you're gonna get help from Hargrove's bratty sister or Wheeler's baby brother?" Will flinched at that last bit, but he wasn't sure if his Dad noticed. "You think they're going to find you?"

Will clenched his fists and glared up at Lonnie, feeling a hatred in his chest. His Mom had never explicitly told him what her relationship with his Dad had been like, but he'd been able to guess, from the way

she flinched when he was mentioned, from the way she didn't like anything associated with him, the way she told Will that he just would've hurt them all if she'd stayed with him. And he *hated* being tossed around between Volunteers and grabbed by the other side of the schism as if he was a shiny prize and not a *person* who never wanted this to begin with.

You think they're going to find you?

Will wanted to make one thing very clear to his Dad. He was *not* going to passively do whatever he wanted. He was *not* going to stay here, and he was *not* going to give up on his freedom that easily.

"I think *Mom's* going to find me." Will said, staring at his Dad darkly, knowing that this was exactly what would piss him off. "And I think she's gonna kick your ass."

There was a split second of silence, and then Will was slapped across the face.

He felt the pain before he processed what had happened, and he spent a good ten seconds staring at the wall, raising a hand slowly to his face to figure out why it was stinging. As soon as he realized what had occurred, he slowly looked back to his Dad, suddenly feeling very fearful again.

His Dad had a flash of anger in his gaze, one that was terrifying Will. Very slowly, he said, "Well, you get *that* out of your system?"

Slowly, Will glanced towards the door, realizing that it had not been locked behind them, then looked down at the lantern on the bench between them, and then he glared back up at his Dad and said, "No."

He leapt to his feet, throwing his arm out so that the lantern crashed to the floor. As the glass shattered and the fire started to spread, Will rushed to the door, threw it open, and sprinted down the hall.

He had no idea where he was, who was here, or if anybody was following him. He didn't have time to process what he was even doing, he just rushed down a dark hall and turned corners at random,

trying to find his way to a staircase or a window he could climb out of. He just knew he couldn't stop running, if he stopped running he might give his attackers a chance to catch up with him...

When he heard footsteps running from the other side of the hall, Will froze for a second, sliding to a stop, and then he looked at the doors lining the hall. Only one of them was labelled- *storage* . Seemed like a decent hiding spot. He pushed open the door and kicked it shut, shivering in the dark room and running to huddle in the corner, shutting his eyes and trying to calm himself down.

Then he heard the feet stop in front of the door.

Fuck.

Will moved fast. Just as a hand started to push the door open, Will pushed a shelf, letting boxes fall in front of the door, effectively blocking it. He heard loud yells on the other side as they realized the door was blocked, and Will knew it wouldn't be long until they figured out why.

When his eyes finally adjusted to the dim light, Will scrambled to his feet, grabbing the nearest box and looking inside; maybe he could find something he could use to escape. This case was filled with boxes of matches; made sense, he guessed. Slowly, he pocketed a box. It made him feel incredibly sick, but... matches would be useful. He found another box of lighters, and one filled with what was probably cans of alcohol, but it was too dark to read the labels.

Will went through box after box, struggling to find something useful, anything that could help him get out. Then, farthest from the door, he found a box that had been hastily shoved under a shelf. He opened it, and then gasped.

His jacket.

There were other items in the box, too- two halves of a spyglass, a few stray papers, and a half-burnt map. But Will grabbed his jacket first, putting it back on, feeling a lot better as soon as he did. He reached into his pocket, and started grinning as soon as he felt the commonplace book. So that must mean...

Will reached into his other pocket and pulled out the radio, sighing with relief. He stood up, about to move, only to hear more footsteps outside, more shouting, more people coming to try and get the door open. He backed up, feeling a flash of panic again, and slowly, he slid into a corner, breathing hard, as he reset the radio to his normal station. He waited a second, wondering if maybe Jonathan was calling him again, maybe he'd gotten to the house and found it burnt... oh *no*, what if he thought Will hadn't gotten out of the fire?

He took a deep breath, about to sing again, when he heard a thump against the door, and a sharp yell. Someone was outside, someone was trying to get in.

So Will abandoned all pretense, and just called, "Is anybody here? *Anybody?*"

There was silence for a second, as Will heard more thumps on the door, and then he heard a voice he didn't recognize. "Is this Will Byers?"

"Yes!" tears sprung to his eyes. "Yes, thank God... who are you? Where's-"

"Your family is coming." said the voice. "They're coming to the radio soon."

Will paused. He'd never heard this voice before, but she sounded young, maybe around his age. "Who is this?" he asked again.

There was a beat, before she replied, "This is El Prasad. Where are you?"

"L?" Will asked, flinching. A Volunteer? "Like the letter?"

"My name." she said quickly. "It's short for-" the radio buzzed out for a second, the signal weakening. By the time her voice was back, Will could only hear the end of her sentence. "-where are you?"

"I don't know, I don't..." Will shook as the door thudded again, and the boxes shook in front of it. "I don't know! They're coming for me, they're gonna find me..."

“Who?”

“The Arsonists! And my Dad... my Dad’s here, he...”

“Stay calm. Your family’s coming. We’re coming for you.”

“You don’t know where I am!”

“We’ll find you.”

The boxes shook again, and Will said, “Please hurry...”

He then heard El say, “Wait, wait, they’re here... they’re here-”

“*Will?*”

Will froze for a second, wondering if that was *really* her voice, if she was *really* speaking to him...

“Mom?”

Yes, it was her! It was her voice!

“Will? Will, baby, oh my God... oh my God, we’re coming. We’re coming to get you.” Joyce said, sounding like she was trying not to sound scared. That was about when Will started crying.

“Will, we’re coming.” Jonathan joined in, and Will curled up, listening carefully to his family’s voices. “We’re coming, where are you?”

“I don’t know.” he managed to say. “But I don’t have long, they’ve almost opened the door.”

“Opened the door?”

“I ran. I ran and I’m hiding in a closet and they’re gonna find me...”

“Honey, listen.” Joyce said seriously. “We’re gonna find you. We’re gonna save you. Stay safe, because we’re getting you out.”

Will took a deep breath, struggling to keep himself from outright sobbing, and then said, “Mom, Dad’s here. Dad’s here and he...”

"I know, baby, I know, we think we know where he is. We're going to get you far away from him, okay?"

"He said..." Will reached up and felt the place on his cheek where he'd been struck. No use telling him Mom that right now, she had enough things to worry about. "He said I was... valuable?"

"Oh, fuck..." Jonathan's voice sounded disgusted.

"Honey, don't listen to them." Joyce said. "Don't listen, they don't... they don't see you as a *person*."

"I know, I know, I... Mom... Mom, were you... you were with them?"

"Yes, yes, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry this happening to you, I tried to get out, I didn't want..."

The door shook again. They almost had it open.

"Mom, Dad said... he said some guy was interested in... in what I can do? Mom, I think... I think Dad wants to send me off with him, I don't wanna go with him, I want to go home..."

"We're taking you home." Joyce assured him. "We're going to get you and take you somewhere sa-"

"Wait." came a new, female voice. "Wait, who is he sending you to?"

"Kali, not now." came El's voice.

"Is it Brenner?" there was a panicked edge to Kali's voice. "Is he sending you to Brenner? Is he sending you to the Phoenix program?"

"I... I think he said 'Brenner', yeah." Will said, starting to shake. "Why? What is that? What are they gonna do to me?"

"We're getting you out. Nothing's going to happen to you because we're coming for you." Joyce said. Then, after a second, she said, "How long can you keep the radio on?"

"Not long... not long, they're coming in... they're gonna get in soon." Will took a deep breath, knowing that he had a minute at the very

most. "Mom, Jonathan, I... I love you."

Joyce sounded like she was crying on the other end. "Will, sweetheart, we love you, too. We love you so much."

"We're going to find you, we *promise*," Jonathan said. "Please just stay safe. Stay alive, and then we're going to take you somewhere safe. Somewhere far away, somewhere where they can't find us."

Will glanced towards the door, almost open. Someone must be shoving it with something heavy... which meant that they wouldn't be prepared as soon as the door opened. They might be thrown off-balance. He knew he couldn't just run out, there would definitely be other people in the hall.

But there was something he could try, as much as he desperately didn't want to.

"I have to go. I can't let them know I called you," he said into the radio.

"They'll know," said Kali, which wasn't very comforting.

"Will, sweetie, I love you. Stay safe," Joyce said.

"Stay safe, we're coming," Jonathan added.

Will shut his eyes, turned off the radio, and shoved it into his pocket, before rushing forwards, pulling a match out, and setting one of the boxes aflame.

He moved quickly, lighting more boxes until a decent fire was going. It didn't seem to be lighting the floor yet- Firestarters would probably build their bases out of nonflammable materials, he guessed- but it was still quite a blaze. He backed up, then, moving against the corner and waiting. He fingered the radio in his pocket as he placed the matchbox back, taking deep breaths and hoping the door would open before smoke could start filling the room.

Thankfully, it did.

The door burst open, the boxes falling all over each other and

spreading the flames. The adults behind the door shouted in surprise, rushing back to avoid getting burned. Will took a second to focus his eyes, watching the hallway; the adults were running off, probably to put out the fire before it could burn any part of their headquarters. Funny how even the arsonists were scared of fire.

Will slowly stepped forwards, once the adults moved out of view. They probably weren't far, they might even be waiting for him to make a move so they could grab him. And, anyway, this was a horrible plan that he probably should've thought through more.

But it was a chance.

Will took a deep breath, clenched his fist, and ran for the door.

He had to duck to avoid the smoke, but keep his eyes as open as was possible in order to see the fire around him. He moved around the boxes on the ground, leaping over the flames and ducking and dodging as fast as he could.

He made a wrong turn a few feet in, and screamed as he felt a searing pain in his left arm. He froze for just a second, stumbling away from the spot where fire had brushed against his arm. He felt the heat and the pain and he suddenly wanted to stop, to sit down and do *something* to make his arm stop hurting like that. But he couldn't stop, he was only halfway through the fire, the fire he'd made himself.

He kept moving, he ran and ducked and flinched back as he felt the insane heat come far too close to his leg; he felt another searing pain, and bit back another scream. He managed to make it out of the room, still ducking under the smoke and jumping over small flames on the floor, trying to keep moving even though his arm was *really* hurting. It wasn't on fire but it *felt* like it was, and his leg was starting to throb, but he had to ignore that, he had to keep moving, he had to find a door or a window or...

He turned a bend in the hall, and collapsed.

He dropped to the ground, the pain still shooting up his leg, suddenly feeling unbearable. He coughed and tried to sit up, only to fall again, his arm screaming the second he tried to use it to support himself. He

shut his eyes, hearing footsteps and shouts, knowing they were going to find him, they were going to drag him back and ship him off somewhere and he didn't know if he'd be able to get away again...

There were suddenly people beside him- how long had they been there? They were inspecting his leg, one of them was saying something that Will couldn't process. He tried, he tried to listen, but his ears were ringing, and he was still struggling to breathe. He coughed again, and then he did manage to hear something.

"That kid sure got through the fire pretty good, huh? Only got burned once."

"Brenner'll like to hear that, won't he?"

44. Some Nice Old Doom and Gloom

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Some Nice Old Doom and Gloom

Joyce and Jonathan stared at the silent radio for a second, and then Joyce wiped her eyes on her sleeve and said, "We need to get everyone together. We have to get to the Headquarters before they move Will again, we need to find him. His Dad could put him in way more danger than-"

"If they want to send him to Brenner," Kali said, as El leaned into her and stared at the wall, looking terrified, "He's probably already in more danger than you could ever imagine."

"Why? Who is he?" Jonathan asked.

Kali paused, glancing between the Byers, before she said, "We need to talk. To everyone. Is there somewhere we can all sit?"

Joyce shook her head.

"The Rubble'll have to do, then." Kali said quietly. "Come on."

Hopper had finally gotten the Sheriff to leave by the time they exited the van, and Mike said, "Why'd you need the Byers?" though El suspected he already knew.

"Will contacted us." Joyce said quickly. "Through the radio. He's in a Headquarters not far from here, but he might not be for long. We can't count on him remaining for even a few minutes."

"Well, let's go!" Lucas said quickly. "We should get to him before-"

"We have a bit of a... situation, first." Kali said quickly. Everyone glanced at her oddly, as she struggled to figure out how to drop the news.

El managed to say it first. "Papa has him."

The kids instantly froze up. "Your *Dad*?" Mike said, sounding horrified.

"Brenner." Kali said darkly, and her Gang joined the kids in looking horrified.

"Wait, Brenner?" Steve asked, considering.

Nancy glanced towards him. "You know him?"

"Not personally, think our teachers mentioned him a few times." Steve said, turning to Nancy. "Remember? He's the one doing some wild experiments we're not allowed to know about. The teachers told us not to talk to him."

"They told us not to talk to a lot of people." Nancy said. "This isn't narrowing it down."

"He was my chaperone, as well as Jane's." Kali said, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes. "He's in charge of the Phoenix program. And if your ex-husband," Kali turned to shoot a look towards Joyce, "Is handing your son over to him, Will's in some deep shit."

"What kind of shit?" Hopper asked.

"The same stuff you and El went through?" Lucas asked, looking like he wanted to puke.

El and Kali both nodded, with El gripping her sister's arm.

"Oh, fuck." Dustin said, as the rest of the kids said very similar things. Mike moved over towards El, grabbing her other hand.

"What's the Phoenix Program, exactly?" Joyce asked, staring at Kali with a growing fear behind her eyes.

“Imagine a regular apprenticeship.” Kali said, “But instead of eventually organizing your lessons by your specialty and training you in that, you’re rigorously trained in every skill, and then more. Combat mainly, but you’re given everything VFD can throw at you, until you can do the job of a team of Volunteers at the same time. And, because it’s a Firestarter experiment, there’s the added training of... of what we call Firewalking.”

“You learn to move through fire.” El said quietly. “Dance. Get in and out of burning buildings, make sure the right things are burning, get the right things out if you need to.”

“You can’t walk through fire.” Steve said.

“You can learn how to avoid the flames.” Kali said. “And you learn. After you’ve been burned.” Kali turned to Joyce again, her eyes hardening. “And if Will fights back, even in the smallest way, he *will* be burned.”

“Then let’s go!” Jonathan said quickly.

“Yeah, let’s get the kid out of there.” Nancy said.

“It won’t be that easy.” Kali said. “We’re about a half-day behind them at best, and if they figure out Will has sent out a distress signal- which they will- they’ll move him immediately. Even if they don’t, it’s still extremely unlikely we’ll get to whatever hideout they’re at in time.”

“There are tons of Firestarter hideouts.” Nancy said. “I mean, not as many as there used to be, but it could take us years to go to each one, and that’s assuming they don’t move him.”

“Wouldn’t they take him to the other Phoenix kids?” Mick asked.

“I’m the last.” El said.

“Are you sure?” Max asked.

El hesitated before nodding uncertainly.

Kali paused, and then said, “El, would you happen to know where

they would've taken you?" El sharply turned to her, and Kali said, "I haven't been able to find their Headquarters since I left, but you only *just* got out. You should know where they're located."

"I..." El froze for a second, as Mike squeezed her hand tighter.

"Sweetheart," Joyce moved forwards, walking in front of her and kneeling down to get eye-level. "Listen. I know it's probably a... a painful memory for you, but we have to be able to find Will. You just have to tell us where he might be, you don't even have to come with us if you don't want." El widened her eyes. "Just... do you know where he is?"

El bit her lip, glancing back and forth, before she said, "No." Everyone looked a bit disappointed, but then she shut her eyes, gripped Mike's hand, and said, "But I can show you."

"Show us?" Joyce asked.

"On a map."

"We had a map in the firetruck." Max said. "It might be in one of our bags."

"That was a map of the general area." Lucas said. "What if it's farther than that?"

"We've got a map." Funshine spoke up. "In the van."

"Go get it." Kali said, and Mick and Dottie were the first ones to move, racing past them towards their car.

"Once we know where he is," Joyce said, standing back up and turning towards the group, "We head there, drop the kids off somewhere safe, and the rest of us—"

"*Fuck* that!" Max yelled, crossing her arms. "We want to help!"

"Will's our friend, we want to get him back!" Lucas added.

"We can help, too!" Dustin said. "We've got weapons, and, uh—"

“I can drive!”

“Max, for fuck’s sake...”

“We’re not letting you kids into a building specifically designed for an arsonist cult.” Hopper said very quickly.

“We have to save Will.” Lucas said.

“We have to keep you kids safe.” Joyce said.

Mike glanced towards El, before saying, “Ms. Byers, we *have* to help. Will got captured because...” he took a deep breath. “Because he used himself as a distraction. So the rest of us could get out. The only way out was blocked by Volunteers so he ran out so they wouldn’t see us. We owe it to him to try and help.”

“Mike...” Joyce said carefully, though she looked a little surprised by this information. “Mike, I understand you want to help, but the best way you can help is by making sure you don’t get yourselves captured. We can’t go in for Will and then lose one of you.”

“You won’t lose us-” Mike began.

“Listen, kids. These Volunteers are trained since childhood to be as skilled as possible.” Joyce said. “You can ask Nancy or Steve if you don’t believe me, or any of them.” she gestured towards Kali’s gang. “No matter how strong you are, you won’t stand a chance in a building of them. And that’s just *Volunteers*- the arsonists are all that minus any remnant of a moral code. If they realize they can’t capture you, they won’t hesitate to kill you. Your best bet is to stay hidden until we get back with Will.”

“But-” Mike began.

Dottie and Mick ran back with the map, and Mick handed it to El. “This good?” she asked.

El opened it, scanning, and then she said, “Do you have pins?”

“Well, if you’d told us you needed those,” Dottie said bitterly, “We could’ve gotten those while we were at the van.”

El simply shrugged, folding up the map again, before turning and rushing towards the bus. She moved a bit faster than the others expected, since her leg was still pretty heavily bandaged. Mike and Kali turned to follow her almost instantly, closely followed by the rest of the group.

El climbed into the back of the van, pushing aside the radio and digging through boxes. Kali jumped into join her, eventually finding a small case of pins. El grabbed the box, rushed outside, shoved the map against the wall of the van, and swiftly stuck pins in the corners, backing up a second to scan it. Mick let out a slight protest, but everyone else just watched as El reached into the box, pulling out six pins specifically.

El turned back to the map, staring for a second, and then she took a pin and stabbed it into one section, glaring daggers at it. She stabbed the second one in another area, and kept throwing pins on, narrowing her eyes as she seemed to be judging distance between them. When the last one was finally pinned in, El stepped back, observing. "This looks right." she finally said.

"Did they show you a map of their hideouts or something?" Mike asked cautiously.

El shook her head. "They tried to hide it. I looked when they turned around."

She smirked a little, and Mike quickly said, "Awesome."

"So... so these are the general headquarter areas?" Joyce asked, moving closer.

El shook her head. "Exact."

"You got the exact cities by looking at the map once?" Dustin asked.

El shrugged, and Kali said, "Phoenix kids memorize fast."

"We're here." Nancy said, moving forwards and pointing at a city. There were two red pins at about equal distance to each other from the city. "Shit." she muttered, as she realized this.

“Which one would they go to?” Mike asked.

“Whichever one this Brenner guy’s at.” Hopper said.

“Jane, have any of these been destroyed since you’ve seen the map?” Kali asked.

El bit her lip, considering, before shrugging again.

“This one’s gone.” Nancy said, pointing to one closer to the corner. “Volunteers got it.”

“And we haven’t got any bases up in this area anymore.” Steve said, taking off a pin. “From what I remember Carol saying, some Volunteer kids went rogue, trashed the place, and skipped town.”

“That doesn’t help anything.” Axel said sharply.

“If Brenner was interested in Will already,” Kali said, “He’d want to be near him, so he’s definitely in one of these two locations. Which one’s which?”

“That one’s in the direction that the path to the Hideout would be.” Joyce said, gesturing. “But it’s hard to get to, really only accessible by train, unless you go the long way around or use the tunnels, and we don’t want to risk such a large group in the tunnels.”

“I know them pretty well.” Nancy said.

“Still, we’ve got a lot of people.” Joyce said. “The other location is farther into the mountains.”

“I’ve been to that one.” Steve said. “Once, while the Chaperones were picking some stuff up. It’s cold as hell. View’s pretty great, though.”

“What about tunnel access?” Nancy asked.

Steve shook his head. “I mean, you *could* reach it, but it’s very... uphill.”

“The train hideout is out best bet.” Kali said. “Both sound pretty inaccessible, but if Brenner was waiting for a child to be delivered to

him, he wouldn't wait in an uncomfortable mountain headquarters."

"Um, hi?" Lucas said. "We *really* would not like to be on a train again."

"Yeah, I think we mentioned?" Dustin added. "We had to *jump off* the last one, and we would not like to repeat that."

"It's better than taking the tunnels." Nancy said.

"Listen, kids," Joyce said, "We won't have to jump off a train again."

"How do you know?" Lucas asked.

Joyce paused, and Hopper quickly said, "Because we have a much larger number and could defend ourselves from any attackers."

"Could we take over the train if need be?" Max asked.

"We're not letting you *drive a train*." Mike said.

"I know how to drive a train." Joyce said offhandedly.

"We're not letting *you* drive a train." Hopper added.

"There's, what, fifty of us?" Steve said, turning to the kids. "We'd be able to fight off some dumb Volunteers, no problem."

"What about dumb Firestarters?" Dustin asked.

"Nance and I can handle that."

The kids glanced towards each other, and then Lucas said, "Okay. For Will. But I swear to God, if I have to jump off again, I'm killing all of you."

45. Family History Lesson

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Family History Lesson

Joyce paid for the train tickets, and they all had a compartment to themselves. Mick kept watch one one side, staring out the window, while the rest of Kali's gang sat by her, having some kind of discussion on a plan. Steve and Nancy sat on the other end, occasionally glancing into the next compartment, while the kids sat by Joyce and Hopper. Jonathan sat across from his Mom, playing with something in his jacket and glancing worriedly towards Nancy. Lucas and Max were holding hands under the table, while Mike was half-asleep on El's shoulder as she looked between Joyce and Kali, the latter of whom would occasionally share a look with her sister. Dustin, after a few moments of doodling on paper, turned to Joyce and said, "So... what was VFD like?"

"What?"

"You know... you were a part of it, right?" Dustin said. "Were you kidnapped, too?"

"Yes, I was kidnapped when I was younger than you." Joyce said. "Didn't have a chance to escape, so they brainwashed me into becoming a Volunteer. I left after I had Will."

"What was it like?" Mike asked.

"Yeah," Max said. "We know what the arsonists are like, cause El told us. But how different is it from Volunteers?"

"Well, we don't get set on fire." Joyce said. "And we don't get matches or lighters, not since the schism worsened. We're trained in everything that could we could be trained in, and then once we discovered our specialty, we were trained in that. I was trained in codes and communication."

“What happens when you’re done with school?” Mike asked.

“You’re sent into the field.” Joyce said. “Spying, stealing, hiding... recruiting... I was fortunate enough to not be called to do that but back then, back before I realized what was going on... I might’ve.” She took a deep breath. “That scares me.”

“Do you... know what our parents did?” Mike asked.

Joyce shook her head. “Only found out there were Volunteers still in Hawkins after your abduction. There was a fire shortly before I left Lonnie, and I thought that meant the Volunteers would leave; that’s what they normally did.”

“Why’d you get married to a Firestarter?” Max asked.

Joyce froze for a second, and then said, “I’d...”

“So,” Hopper interrupted, “What have you kids been up to?”

Joyce shot him a grateful glance, and Dustin said, “Well, our kidnappers locked us up, but then arsonists set the place on fire and we escaped. Will... he stayed behind, but El caught up to us and beat up some Firestarters. It was pretty cool.”

“We traveled for a bit.” Mike said. “Found out Max’s stepbrother’s an arsonist, our families were with our kidnappers, and eventually we ran into Kali and her Gang.”

“They gave us weapons.” Lucas added.

“And while we were at this Library,” Mike continued, reaching into his jacket pocket, “We found this.”

He pulled out half the spyglass. Hopper and Joyce looked very curious, while Jonathan instantly perked up, staring.

“Spyglass.” El said quickly.

“Yes, I know.” Joyce said.

“We’ve got those.” Nancy spoke up, and Mike jumped, wondering

how long she'd been paying attention. He glanced over, seeing that she and Steve were watching them. "You only got half?"

"Uh, yeah." Mike said. "It's all there was." He turned to Joyce. "Do you know who this belongs to?"

"You, now." Joyce said simply. "There's no way of telling who it belonged to; I would say whoever was stationed at the Library, but they would've been able to replace a broken spyglass, unless it was a sentimental thing."

Mike glanced towards the others, and when his eyes fell on Jonathan, the teenager said, "Wait, Mike. Hold that out a second." Mike paused, but held out the half-spyglass. "Can you flip it?"

"Why?"

"Just... try it."

Mike flipped it over in his hands, and slowly, Jonathan pulled another half-spyglass from his pocket. He pressed it into Mike's, and they clicked together.

They both stared for a second, and then El reached forwards, taking the spyglass and pushing it together and apart, eyes widening.

"Whoa." Max said softly.

Mike stared at the spyglass as El handed it back to him, and then he heard, "Where did you get that?" He turned, to see Joyce was staring at Jonathan, looking incredibly concerned.

Jonathan froze for a second, stammering. "I, uh, I found, um... it was in your drawer, I wanted to help you pack before you got back to the house..."

Joyce shut her eyes, and Lucas said, "Wait, why did *you* have half a spyglass?"

"How long have you had that?" Joyce asked Jonathan, pointedly ignoring the question.

“Since we left.”

“Jonathan-”

“Ms. Byers!” Dustin said. “Why do you have half a spyglass?”

Joyce paused for a second, still looking very hesitant, before she said, “It... it was in a fire.”

“And you didn’t get it replaced?” asked Nancy, causing Joyce to jump; she’d forgotten that she was listening, too. “Can’t Volunteers get new spyglasses?”

“This was after I left.” Joyce said. “Couldn’t exactly go back, get a new spyglass, then-”

“What fire happened after we left?” Jonathan asked.

“It’s not important.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Can we talk about it,” Hopper interrupted, “After we rescue Will?”

There was a beat, and then Joyce and Jonathan both hesitantly nodded.

Then, Lucas said quietly, “Are you gonna try to take us back to Hawkins?”

Hopper turned to him. “What?”

“I mean... that’s the legal thing to do.” Lucas said carefully, not entirely sure how to phrase it. “And you’ve just been kinda hanging out with us, I just... was wondering... because our parents would probably just send us back and...”

Hopper shook his head. “No, no I don’t think... I’m going to see what I can do in Hawkins, probably, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to let you come back, at least until I can figure out which of your parents are involved and which aren’t.”

“We can answer that.” Nancy said.

“What?” Max asked, turning towards her.

Nancy hesitated. “The... the files that told us where Will was. They mentioned... mentioned your parents.” She took a deep breath, before turning to Mike. “Our Mom’s a Volunteer, Dad’s not in it. Lucas, your parents are mostly non-active, but that could change if they think you’re still in the organization. Dustin, your Mom’s not in it, but your Dad is- or was? I don’t...” Dustin didn’t respond, so Nancy continued. “Max, your entire family, but on different schism sides. Sorry about that.”

Max shrugged. “I... expected that.”

“Do you know mine?” El asked quietly.

Nancy looked at her carefully, then shook her head. “We found the files on the Hawkins kids. You weren’t from Hawkins.”

El said, “Kali says my Mom was a Volunteer.”

Kali turned at the sound of her name, and then said, “Yeah, we found out about her when we found a Volunteer hideout nobody was in, they had a hidden file room.” She glanced towards Joyce, Nancy and Steve. “Terry Ives? You know her?” They all shook their heads. “She was recruited, her sister wasn’t good enough, though. Wonder if she knows what happened to her.”

“How do you know she was El’s mom?” Mike asked.

“Cause it said so.” Kali said. “The Firestarters kidnapped her daughter, she broke in to get her back and got herself killed. The timelines added up to the break-in I escaped during, and to Jane’s age. And of course her name.”

“What about your parents?” Joyce asked.

“Dead Volunteers.” Kali said simply. “Someone set their house on fire. You know, what happens to most Volunteers.”

Joyce, El, and the Gang nodded at that, while Nancy and Steve

glanced away and Hopper, Jonathan, and the kids looked disgusted.

“God, fuck this whole VFD thing.” Dustin said.

“Oh, did you only come to that conclusion now?” Lucas asked sarcastically.

“I’m so ready for this to be over with.” Max said. “I don’t even care where we end up, I just wanna be as far from this as possible.”

“Well, I guess that’s good.” Joyce said softly. “Because we could end up just about anywhere.”

They fell silent after that, and soon Kali turned back to her Gang to discuss more planning, and Nancy and Steve turned back to the window, and the kids tried to get some rest again.

When they reached the town, Joyce managed to find them a hotel that she was convinced wasn’t associated with Volunteers- the eye wasn’t anywhere, none of the staff members they spotted seemed to have books or tattoos, and Joyce walked up to one and dropped a hidden message, one that they didn’t pick up on.

“But that doesn’t mean you’re safe.” Joyce informed the children as she let them into their room. Jonathan was with her, everyone else waited downstairs.

“We’re leaving you here for tonight while we go to the Headquarters.” Joyce continued. “Kali thinks it should be at the edge of town. If someone tries to get in who’s not us, I have a rope in my case that should be able to get you out the window fine- you can climb ropes?”

El and Max nodded, while the boys looked a bit nervous.

Joyce turned to Jonathan, saying, “Okay, can you stay with the kids?”

“Mom, I want-”

“I know, I *know*, I know you want to find Will.” Joyce said quickly, looking sympathetic. “But the kids need someone to watch them, and...” She paused, glancing towards the children, “Jonathan, if your Father’s there... I don’t want you anywhere near him.”

Jonathan paused, before glancing to the ground and saying, “Okay. Okay, but... if you need anything... God, how are you supposed to contact us?”

“We’ll be fine. We’re going to get Will and get out.” Joyce said. “Just watch the kids and stay safe.”

“Come back soon.”

Joyce hugged Jonathan, said something else comforting, and then left.

The second she was gone, Mike turned to Jonathan and said, “So. Are we actually just gonna sit here, or are we going after them?”

46. Will is, once again, Fed Up

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Will is, once again, Fed Up

Once again, he was being thrown from place to place again.

But this time, he didn't know if he could run.

Will found out he was being moved right after he was treated for his burns. The Firestarters surprisingly had very fast medical care-though, maybe not surprisingly, many of them *must* get burned on the job- and before he knew it, his arm was bandaged up.

"You're lucky it wasn't worse." the woman said, sounding a bit impressed. "You did a good job setting that fire, and managing to get out. The high-ups'll be impressed with that."

Will didn't respond, biting his lip and staring at the wall, wishing he was anywhere else but here.

"Your leg should be fine," she continued. "But it'll hurt for quite a bit. Your arm, on the other hand, might need a week or so..."

And then his Dad came in, and the medic stepped aside, busying herself with some papers, while Will kept his eyes on the wall. Lonnie was silent for a second, and then he said, "Alright, kid, who did you contact?"

Goddamnit.

"We know the radio was used. Who did you call?"

"No one." Will said.

"No one?"

Will shut his eyes, hoping to God he was a good actor. He said, as

bitterly as he could, “Nobody was on the line. Nobody was listening.”

There was silence, and Will wondered if Lonnie believed him or not. Finally, though, he said, “Right, well, we still need to get you out of here. We’re going through the tunnels, get up.”

Will froze for a second. “I just got my leg burned.”

“Get up and walk.”

“I can’t-”

He felt his burned arm grabbed, and he was forced up to his feet. Will let out a shout, but his Dad either didn’t notice or didn’t care, simply pushing him forwards a bit more. Will shut his eyes, clenching his fists and trying to keep himself from yelling. He tried to remember what he’d learned about balance in his previous training. If he could scale a mountain without a harness, he could very well keep walking with an injured leg and an arm being gripped so tightly it might as well be covered in fire ants. Just keep walking, just keep walking and don’t think about the burn, don’t think about how they’re taking you as far away from help as they can...

A group of Firestarters ended up joining them by the time they reached the tunnels, and Will had to slide down an entrance, landing right on his bad arm, which did *not* make him feel any better. But still they made him keep moving, said he was going to have to get used to moving while injured, get used to burns and pain.

And they walked for what felt like forever, to the point where Will was starting to feel numb in his legs, and still nobody thought to even do more than make sure he didn’t run away. When they finally stopped, Will crumpled against the wall, breathing raggedly and trying to avoid touching his arm at all costs. Nobody paid him any mind, instead reaching up to open the trapdoor. A few of them went up first, before someone roughly stood Will back up and lifted him, and Will barely managed to scramble out the trapdoor and into whatever building they were in. And then, as his eyes adjusted to the sudden bright light, he was lifted and dragged to another room.

He figured he should probably protest, but at this point he was in too

exhausted to think of what to say. His arm felt like it was on fire again, his leg felt worse than it had when it was originally burned, he had no idea where he was or how his family was going to find him, and he was pretty sure he was being tossed to yet another mentor, only this time he didn't have a sliver of hope that this person was going to treat him right. Not only was he an arsonist, but that girl on the radio- Kali?- had seemed terrified of him. And that *definitely* couldn't be good.

Will finally got to rest for a bit, but it wasn't as if he enjoyed it. He was left alone in a room that seemed like a simple child's bedroom, if completely undecorated and painted very black. He just laid on the bed for a bit and stared at the ceiling, hoping that his arm would stop hurting soon, *praying* that his arm would stop hurting soon, wondering if maybe he should take the bandage off and check it again, wondering if that would just make it worse.

And, of course, if he wasn't thinking about his arm, he was thinking about what they were going to do to him.

They were probably pissed about him running from his Dad and trying to set a building on fire- though now that he thought about it, maybe the journey through the tunnels was his punishment. It sure felt like a punishment.

Maybe his punishment was being forced to wait for hours for someone to just show up and tell him what the *fuck* was going on.

He fell into a restless sleep after a while, but he couldn't have been out for long, he didn't think. He woke up to footsteps outside the hall, and his arm did *not* feel any better. But, well, it didn't feel worse, so that was good, probably. And his leg didn't actually hurt that much, aside from a slight sting when he sat up.

The door opened, and Will sat up, suddenly very alert.

Someone walked in, someone he hadn't seen before. Will stared at him for a second, struggling desperately to keep his face blank. The man gave off an aura of foreboding, and Will suddenly felt very, very

cold.

The man didn't say anything, he simply sat in the chair next to the bed as the door swung shut behind them and then, after a second, he said, "Don't bother trying to run out the door this time. We have guards."

"Can't really run." Will said bitterly. "If you haven't noticed, I set my leg on fire. And my arm."

"Technically, you just burned it." the man said. "But even's that's impressive. You made your way through a fire without serious injury."

"It wasn't impressive." Will said, bristling slightly. "The boxes were on fire, not the floor. It was just a matter of avoiding those. It's not like I have superpowers."

"Do you know how many adults wouldn't even be able to do that?"

"I don't care." This man was terrifying Will, but there was no way in hell he'd let him know that. "I don't care, I want to go. Please just *let me go*."

The man didn't look angry, or upset at Will's begging. He just looked... blank. And that was scarier than any other emotion he could've shown.

"I'm afraid we can't do that." he said simply. "You're too valuable."

"Why? I'm thirteen, I can't even do math right. I can't talk to people. I can't do *anything* right. What can I *possibly* do?"

"Well, you've shown quite a talent for agility and codes," the man said. "As well as art. And fire. You could be able to do very many things, with proper training."

"I don't want-"

"It doesn't matter." Of course it didn't. "You're a very talented child, which, considering your parents-"

“Shut *the fuck up!*” As soon as Will said that, he flinched back, expecting maybe another slap or something. The man, however, just kept staring at him.

There was silence for a second, and then he said, “Stand up.”

Will considered protesting more, but at the same time... if he caused trouble, he might get hidden away somewhere else, somewhere farther away. And then how would his Mom find him?

Slowly, he stood up, flinching slightly. His leg didn’t hurt like hell anymore, but that didn’t mean it felt *good*.

“You’re going to need to learn to work through injuries.” the man said sharply.

“Doesn’t mean I can right now.” Will snapped.

The man ignored that. “Now, walk with me. I’d like to show you something.”

He stood up, and Will followed, wondering if maybe he could make a run for the windows once they were in the hall. No, no, he’d just injure himself more, and there was no way he’d be able to climb down a wall or a pipe with only one arm. His best chance was to just follow this man and do what he said, at least until his arm healed. Maybe his family would find him before then.

“That looks like it.” Kali said, her voice dropping low as she glared ahead.

The building looked pretty unsuspecting, aside from the fact that it was several feet away from the rest of the town, almost on the edge of the woods. The group had drifted into the trees to avoid being out in the open, and as Joyce observed the building, she did notice scratches in the wood that resembled a certain eye.

“Alright, here’s the plan.” Kali said. “We can’t have a large group in there, we’ll get caught in a millisecond.”

“So the normal plan?” Axel asked.

When Kali nodded, Hopper asked, “What’s the normal plan?”

“It’s what we do if we have to get information from a safehouse. It’s the only plan that hasn’t backfired on us yet.” Kali said. “Mick and Axe get the van. We’re going to have it nearby for a quick getaway. Hopper, are you coming in?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, stay with Nancy and Steve. You two, make sure he doesn’t die instantly. They’ll be on the lower levels, while Byers and I’ll head towards the upper levels. It’s best to split the search that way and meet in the middle. If the kid’s in this building already, which he likely is, we’ll need to act fast. If you find him, get him out instantly. If you see Brenner, do *not* engage him. In fact, avoid all arsonists in general.”

“How do we talk to each other if we’re split up?” Joyce asked.

“Ever heard of a handheld radio?” Kali asked, and Dottie pulled one out of her jacket and tossed it to her. “It works very short range, though, so it’s not useful in anything but this situation.”

“Also, no, you can’t keep it.” Steve said, having learned from experience.

“I’m still not sure splitting up is a good idea.” Joyce said.

“We’ll cover more ground.” Kali said.

“Also, Hop, let Steve and me enter any rooms first.” Nancy said. “We have the best chance of not raising any alarms, we could come up with some bullshit about how our chaperones sent us and buy some time.”

“I might be able to stall if need be.” Joyce said quietly. Then, a bit louder, she said, turning to Hopper, and eying Nancy and Steve a bit, “And if you get captured, get out as fast as you can, leave the other groups behind if need be. Abandon your moral code if it gets inbetween you and the door. We’ll find our own way out, just do *not*

get captured. That's the worst thing that could happen."

"And Dottie, Fun, they're going to be our diversion." Kali said. "There's no way we can just walk in and expect it to be unguarded. You know what to do?"

"Plan A, got it." Funshine said, before turning to Dottie. "We managed to get those explosives out of the van before we had to run, right?"

"The what?" Hopper asked, while Dottie nodded.

"Alright, we'll go in after people filter out." Kali said. "Climb in through a window, and split. Is that understood?"

Hesitantly, everyone nodded.

"Good." she said. "Now, let's go kick some ass."

"What is this?" Will asked, looking around the room.

This room didn't seem like a training area. As he stood in the corner, Will realized that the only thing in the gray room was a filing cabinet spanning the wall. The man had moved over that way, digging through the papers while he started talking.

"When did you become aware of VFD, Byers?"

Will flinched. "Um... when I got recruited. A week ago?"

"And, I believe, you were taken from your Father as an infant?"

Well, that was a harsh way to put it. "My Mom left my Dad when I was a toddler, yeah."

"And why do you think that was?"

"Because he's a dick."

"Because your Mother couldn't face the truth of our organization, and her part in it."

“No, it was because my Dad’s a dick.” Sarcasm was probably not the best idea at this time, but Will really didn’t give a fuck. “I just met him. She was right.”

The man gave him a look. “Lonnie Byers is one of our best agents, I’d suggest against saying things like that.”

“And I’d suggest not making me walk up three flights of stairs and expecting me to be happy about it.”

“You tend to talk back a lot, don’t you?” the man said darkly. “We’ll have to fix that.”

Will froze for a second, biting his lip and staring at the ground. Shit. He really didn’t know when to shut up, did he?

“I did have a talk with your Father before coming for you.” the man said. “He told me about your conversation. You think your family is going to come for you?”

Will glanced away, and then the man just walked forwards and handed him a file.

“What’s this?” Will asked.

The man stared at him, and then said, “How much do you really know about your Mother?”

Will froze for a second before staring down at the file.

Horowitz, Joyce.

“Why are you giving me this?” he asked quietly.

“I think,” said the man, “It’s time you know why she’s not the hero you think she is.”

But before anything else could happen, the door opened, and another arsonist peered in.

“Brenner!” the man said. “We have trouble! Something happened in the woods, we might have to-”

Acting completely on impulse, Will shoved the folder into his jacket, rushed forwards, ducked under the man at the door, and ran into the hall.

Before the two men could even react, he was gone.

47. The Kids Ignore the One Rule They Were Given

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

The Kids Ignore the One Rule They Were Given

“We’re not *leaving*! Stop packing up!” Jonathan yelled.

Ignoring him, Mike turned to El. “How far can you walk?”

“Far.” she said.

“Will it hurt?”

“Maybe.”

“Alright, Dustin, can you help her walk? Or take the flashlight?”

“I’ll take her.” Dustin said.

“No! No, no one’s taking anyone,” Jonathan said, “Because nobody is *leaving*, okay? My Mom said we’ve all got to stay here, that’s the best thing we can do.”

The kids all glanced at him. Lucas and Dustin were shoving anything useful into their pockets, while El flipped a knife and Mike helped Max lift the rope out of the bag. He handed it to her, and as she tied it by the window, Mike rushed over towards El.

“We have to go find Will.” Lucas said.

“And get kidnapped by arsonists?” Jonathan said.

“Your Mom might need help.” Mike reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the spyglass. He held it up, and said, “Jonathan, can you use this?”

“What?”

“It’s for codes, right?”

“Yeah.”

“El’s got one, too.” Mike said. “Can you use it if we need it?”

“No, because we’re not going to need it, we’re *staying put*.”

“Are you saying you don’t wanna find Will?” Dustin asked.

“No, no, of *course* not, but if we get captured-”

“Then we won’t get captured.” Mike said. “We have El, she’s basically a superhero.”

“Not on that leg.” Lucas said hesitantly.

“Did you have to mention that right now?” Dustin glared at him.

“What’s wrong with her leg?” Jonathan asked.

“She got stabbed, we can talk about that later.” Mike said. “Right now, we need to follow them- edge of town, right?”

“That’s what Kali said.” Max nodded. “We can get there pretty fast. I can steal a car again.”

“We already let you steal a car.” Mike said. “And we’re not about to let you do it again.”

“You’re no fun, Wheeler.”

“I don’t wanna drive through a fence again!”

“Would you rather scale one?”

“We’re not doing *any of that!*” Jonathan said. “Stop tying the rope to the window, Max!”

“Can’t hear you, busy tying a rope to the window!”

“You heard my Mom.” Jonathan said, stepping in front of the window as the other kids stood up. “It’s too dangerous for us to go. I want to save Will, too, but if we get captured, we’re fucked.”

“We’re not going into the building without a plan or anything!” Mike said. “We’ll just wait outside to make sure that nothing bad happens.”

“We see fire or signs of a struggle, we go in.” Lucas added.

“You don’t need to do this.” Jonathan said. “Listen, Will’ll understand if you’re not there. You’ve done enough, nobody’s expecting you-”

“It’s not about who expects us to help.” Dustin said. “It’s about not abandoning our party member.”

“You’re not... you’re *not* abandoning him.” Jonathan said. “We’re not just leaving him, we’re keeping ourselves safe while capable people take care of it.”

“We just want to make sure they get out okay.” Mike said. “That’s not a crime.”

“We’re helping our friend.” El added, smiling slightly.

“And if they mess up and all get captured,” Max said, “Where does that leave us?”

Jonathan paused, glancing between the kids. He knew he had to keep them safe, had to make sure they didn’t die, but... he desperately wanted to make sure his Mom and brother made it out okay. He wanted to make sure Nancy made it out okay. And Hopper. And Steve. And even Kali and her friends, even though he barely knew them.

“Here’s the deal.” Jonathan said. “I go with you- hell, I’ll drive you. But you do *not* go in without me, you do *not* do anything to make yourself seen, and you’ll do *whatever* I say. I’m in charge, and I’m going to make sure none of you get caught. Understand?”

They nodded, and Jonathan held out his hand. “Spyglass?” Mike handed it over, and he said, “Okay, now, who wants to go down the rope first?”

Joyce had fucked up.

After something had exploded several feet into the woods- and Kali had assured the group that was the plan- several arsonists had run off to investigate. The group had then gone in through a window in a darker room, with Nancy and Steve going first to make sure the room was clear before letting the others in. They hesitantly split down a hall, with Joyce heading up the dark stairwell with Kali. Joyce was on edge the whole time, knowing it was only a matter of time before someone ran down the stairs or rushed up after them, it was only a matter of time before they got caught...

"We're starting from the top." Kali said simply as they reached the top of the stairwell. "And going down. Don't be too loud, and know we're definitely going to have to fight somebody at some point. Just try to kill them quietly."

"Or we could knock them out."

"They'll wake up."

"Yeah, but it could take some time."

"We're *not* having a conversation right now." Kali groaned, reaching to open the door. "We're finding your son. What happened to 'abandon your moral code if it stands between you and the way out'?"

"Just knocking out somebody instead of killing them isn't-"

"Shut up." Kali said, and she opened the door. She peered through for a second, and then stepped out, a hand on the gun in her belt. Joyce hesitated before following.

She opened all the unlocked doors, while Kali moved towards the locked ones with a hairpin, moving faster than Joyce had ever seen. Most of the rooms seemed to be empty, even of furniture, though some had storage boxes that were mostly filled with matches and lighters. She found one room that looked like a small gym, probably for exercise training, and two that looked like meeting rooms. Most of the locked rooms were for storage, and Joyce didn't have time to

look through all the boxes- she just called for Will and waited a minute before leaving.

She was starting to get nervous. She hadn't expected a lot of arsonists, seeing as this project seemed to be a heavily-protected secret and most of them would have left the building to look at the explosion anyway. But they hadn't run into *any* yet, or any sign of Will.

"Another storage room." Kali said, hissing as she shut the last door on the floor. "We're going to have to try down one."

They went to the next floor, once again searching as fast as they could. Joyce eventually moved a little too far from Kal, turning the corner and searching rooms while the teenager cursed under her breath at a lock that seemed to be stuck.

"Will?" Joyce quietly called into a storage room, before moving onto another empty room.

Then she opened a door, and she gasped.

There was a bedroom. A child's bedroom.

It was mainly blank, mostly featureless, with the walls painted black, a dark, hard wood floor, and very simple furniture: a bed, a chest, a closet in the corner, and a chair next to a sidetable, where a lit candle was sitting. But the bed was small, and the chest had little butterflies painted onto it. It was clearly a room for a kid.

Joyce stepped in, slowly moving to the closet. She opened it, disappointed to see there were only clothes inside.

Quietly, she turned towards the bed and the chest, scanning for all the possible hiding areas there. "Will?" she called carefully.

No answer.

She peered under the bed and into the chest. Nobody. She should've figured...

Suddenly, she felt a chill. It took her a second to place it, as she

didn't think it was the wind- Volunteers tended to not leave windows open, unless of course they were the windows from their children's rooms. Then she realized she wasn't feeling a literal chill; she was sensing something wrong in the room. Or in the hall...

Fuck!

Someone grabbed her from behind, throwing something over her mouth- chloroform, if she had to guess. But she wasn't going out that easily, fuck no. She held her breath and dropped, before stomping hard on her attacker's foot. He flinched, and Joyce took the opportunity to drop to the floor and flip, with whoever had been holding her getting tossed over her shoulder and slamming into the wall. Joyce rolled over and jumped to her feet, flipping her hair over her shoulder and immediately moving into a fighting position.

And then she froze again.

The attacker looked up, and he paused, too, looking confused. "Byers?"

Joyce stared for a second, and then she shook her head to clear it, backing up.

"I didn't expect you to be here."

She remembered this man, she remembered him planning fires with Lonnie, setting fires with Lonnie...

He started to move, then, and Joyce almost instinctively stepped aside, threw her arm out, and knocked him to the ground. He leapt up and kicked her, and she fell back against the wall, her ears ringing for a second. Joyce shut her eyes and kicked out as he ran towards her, and he fell, knocking against the sidetable.

Which was a mistake.

Because then the candle fell over, and lit the floor beside them on fire.

"Fuck!" Joyce yelled, jumping up to put the fire out, looking around for something she could use. Unfortunately, that meant she was

distracted, and the arsonist managed to grab her arm. She gasped, whipping around, trying to back away from him, away from the fire, the *fire* ...

She heard the gunshot before she processed it.

When she heard it, she immediately shut her eyes, freezing up to keep herself from panicking immediately. And when she felt the grip on her arm slacken and drop away as a body hit the floor, she figured out what had just happened, and she backed up before turning towards the door, where Kali was staring at her.

“Who was that?” she asked.

Joyce tried to respond, but she found herself unable to form the words.

“Nevermind.” Kali said, lowering the gun. “Anyone in the building will have heard that. We have to go.”

“The fire-” Joyce whispered.

“We don’t have *time*. Someone else’ll take care of it.” Kali said, running forwards and grabbing Joyce’s arm, dragging her out. “And if they don’t, it’s no loss. We’ll just have to move a bit faster.”

Will had only run for only a few halls before ducking into a closet, and now he was hiding again, but he couldn’t hide for long, he didn’t want to be in this storage room for any longer than necessary. And he *really* didn’t want to be so scared right now, but what was he supposed to do?

He sat by the door for a second, waiting for noises. He was there for a few minutes, wondering if maybe he couldn’t hear out it at all, or maybe nobody was pursuing him, or maybe whatever had caused that explosion outside had gotten everyone’s attention.

While he was there, he reached out, grabbing a broom in the corner, and subconsciously breaking it over his leg. Might as well have some form of weapon while running from arsonists.

Soon as footsteps passed by, he left, turning the bend to head for the stairwell and holding the broken broom in his good arm. He just had to get to the stairs, get out a lower window or door, and then...

And then what? He didn't know where he was. Dangerous people were everywhere. Maybe he could live on the streets, until his family tracked him down. It was a safer option than anything else he could think of at the moment.

Will turned a bend, and ran smack into someone. He felt pain flare up in his arm again, and he fell to the ground, causing his leg to hurt again. The broom fell from his hand, and he cried out, as he heard a voice saying, "Are you okay? Holy shit! Who are-"

Will backed up instantly as the person's hand came closer, trying to help him up. He flinched and stared at her for a second, still shaking. She didn't look much older than him, maybe the same age as Jonathan.

It took him a second to process that she was trying to help him up. The other Firestarters hadn't done that.

"Who are you?" he asked, panicked.

"I... I'm... holy shit, are you Jonathan's brother?"

Will stared up at her, his fear melting away into a relief. "You know my brother?"

"Holy shit!" the girl turned around, calling, "I found him! I found the kid! ... fuck, they might not be up the stairs yet..." She turned back, reaching into her pocket to grab something, before glancing down. "What happened to your arm?"

Will was about to answer, when he heard footsteps running towards them- from the hall he'd just run from. It wasn't this girl's friends who were coming.

"Please, you have to help me-" Will began, trying to stand up but falling again. "They're after me, they-" The girl glanced towards the hall, nodded, and lifted him to his feet, handing him back the broom handle and pushing him behind her.

"Listen," she said quickly, "I've got friends here. Your Mom is here, along with the Hawkins Chief of Police. Do you know him?" When he nodded, she added, "There are two other teenagers, their names are Steve and Kali. If you see any of them, they will help you get out. We have people stationed outside with a getaway car. I'll radio them all in just a second to tell them you're on your way."

"Where's Jonathan?"

"Making sure your friends don't die. I'll hold off whoever's coming this way, just run."

Will nodded, and took off down the hall, hoping that he didn't slip again, hoping that he wouldn't fall, that he'd find help before anyone else could get to him.

But he didn't have much time.

"We shouldn't be here." Dustin said. "We shouldn't be here, *fuck*."

"Shut up or go back to the hotel." Max said, raising her binoculars.

They were staring at the building, waiting for some sign of their friends exiting or causing commotion. Nothing had happened for the past several minutes, but that didn't mean Dustin (or Jonathan, really) was any calmer.

"We're going to die." he said. "Either the Firestarters will find us and kill us, or Ms. Byers will find out we left the hotel and *she'll* kill us..."

"I don't think she'd kill *you*." Jonathan said. "Me, maybe, but-"

"We won't get found out." Mike said. "El, can I see your spyglass-El?"

He turned, pausing for a second. El had sat down on the grass, staring at the building with a spark of fear in her eyes. Mike glanced towards the rest of the Party, and then walked to sit by El. "Are you okay?" he asked.

El bit her lip, still staring ahead.

"It's okay if you're not." Mike added.

She shut her eyes, and said quietly, "Papa's in there."

"Oh, oh, yeah." Mike said. "I forgot, I..."

"So did I." El whispered. "But..."

"But?"

She sighed, curling up a bit. "The buildings all look the same. It's my home."

"I... it doesn't have to be." Mike said, placing his hand over hers. "I'm sorry, I... I should've thought of how you'd react to the building, maybe you should've stayed at the hotel..."

El shook her head. "Not if others are fighting."

"We'd understand if you didn't."

"I want to fight." She took a deep breath. "But it's still..."

"Scary?" Mike asked. "That's okay."

El shut her eyes and nodded, before reaching into her jacket pocket and digging out her spyglass, handing it to Mike. "What do these dials do?" he asked.

"Translate codes. Heat up. Lots of things." El shrugged.

Jonathan turned slightly, and said, "If you wanna know about the spyglass, I'd ask your sister."

"My..." it took Mike a second to remember Nancy. "Oh! Oh, does she... have one of these?"

Jonathan nodded. "Yeah. She and Steve."

"And your Mom only had half?"

“Yeah.”

“And you don’t know why?” Dustin asked.

“It... probably doesn’t matter.” Jonathan answered.

Dustin nodded. “And it really won’t matter if we *die*, so...”

“We’re not gonna die.” Lucas said. “We’re just...”

He trailed off, and everyone followed his gaze. And then Max said, “Shit...”

They could see a flickering shape inside one of the top story windows. And they all recognized it as fire.

“They’re... they’re firestarters. They’ll have it under control.” Mike said unconvincingly.

El shook her head, fear entering her eyes. “No, they don’t... not in front of the windows...”

“El?” Mike asked, turning to her, realizing she was shaking uncontrollably.

“Danger.” she whispered. “Danger, *danger*...”

Before she could say anything else, they heard a sound that put them all on edge. The sound of a car driving up.

Turning around, they spotted, just through the trees, several black cars drive in, parking outside the building. People jumped out, with some heading into the woods, others heading into the building, and the rest waiting by the cars, looking around for anything suspicious.

“That’s not good.” Jonathan said.

“Do you think the arsonists called for backup?” Lucas asked.

“Why would they need backup?” Dustin asked. “Do they know our team’s inside?”

“How would they get here so fast?” Max added. “We can’t have been

in there longer than an hour.”

“It’s not very unlikely.” Mike said, considering. “The Firestarters could’ve had guards on the edge of town, patrolling the streets, stationed nearby...”

“We need to get in that building.” Max said. “Those arsonists are either heading in or going to block the exit, we gotta-”

“Absolutely not.” Jonathan said. “We can’t just go in there, we don’t even know where we’re going-”

“You don’t.” El said, suddenly standing, glaring at the building, her eyes fixed on the fire. “But I do.”

48. El Stabs Someone

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

El Stabs Someone

The second they were in the building, El froze up, staring ahead with a blank horror in her eyes.

She had one arm around Mike, just in case she needed help running, while the rest of the Party was climbing in the window behind them, weapons out in case of attack. Jonathan stood right next to El and Mike, prepared to jump in front of them if someone should rush out to attack. When El stopped moving, everyone turned to her, worried.

“El? Are you okay?” Mike asked carefully.

She was still frozen for a moment, staring ahead. This room looked just like the other rooms at the other headquarters, and every bad thing that had ever happened to her was right at the forefront of her mind. She could almost feel the fire all over her, could hear the yelling and screaming. Her wound suddenly felt a lot worse than it had before she’d stepped inside.

“El?”

El slowly turned towards Mike, as the rest of the Party kept watching her. Jonathan came closer, too, and said, “Hey, kid. Do you want to go?”

El shook her head, trying to clear it. She couldn’t freeze up. Not now. Not when people needed her. Not when she could help. “No.” she finally said. “No, no, I want to... let’s go.”

“Are you sure?” Mike asked.

She nodded. “Let’s go.”

Jonathan moved to the door, opened it slightly to look through the

hall and make sure they were alone, before holding it open for the rest of them. El gestured down one hall, and they headed in that direction. They kept moving down that hall for a while, and she really hoped Mike didn't notice how hard she was gripping his shoulder.

"Stairs are left." she said, the second they reached a fork in the hall.

"We should go to the top floors first," Jonathan said, as he held the door open.

El nodded. "We would sleep towards the top." she said.

"It's also where the fire was." Jonathan added. "So they'll probably be there."

"Yeah, Kali set a building on fire to get our attention once." Dustin said. "I can see her doing it again."

"She did what?" Jonathan asked, distracted for a second.

"It's fine, no one was in it." Max said.

They climbed up the stairs, and El started gripping Mike harder. He glanced towards her and said, "El, are you sure you don't wanna go? It's not too late to-" She shook her head. "Okay. Okay, well... when we find someone, we can figure out what we're gonna do. Hopefully we'll find Will before anyone else finds us..."

"This was a bad plan." Lucas suddenly said.

"Thank you." Jonathan said.

"Come on, Lucas!" Max said.

"No, no, we should've had a better plan..." Lucas said. "We should've thought of a way to avoid arsonists, to get Will's attention, or the rest of the adults..."

"Who are going to kill us once they find out we're here." Max said. "But it doesn't matter, we've got to try and help, before all the reinforcements surprise them."

“What happens,” Lucas asked quietly, “If we all get captured?”

“Then we all die.” Dustin said simply. “So, in that case, we won’t have to worry about anything anymore.”

El paled, and Mike said, “Guys, shut up. We’re not gonna get caught, and we’re not gonna die. We’re going to-”

He was cut off by a piercing scream. They all froze, their eyes trailing towards the source of the sound- only a few steps above them was the door that led to the third or fourth floor. But the scream itself wasn’t what was terrifying them; it was who had screamed. They all recognized the voice.

“Oh, shit.” Lucas said.

Joyce and Kali had reached the bottom of one stairwell, and had to rush through the halls to get to the other one.

And on the way, they fucked up again.

Because while they were running, three Firestarters turned the bend, almost running into them before skidding to a stop, eyes wide. Joyce froze, while Kali instantly reached into her pocket, trying to find the gun.

Shit. Joyce realized, backing up a few steps. *They came up to put out the fire. We led them right to us.*

“What the hell-” one Arsonist said.

Kali groaned, muttered, “Shit,” and ran forwards, dropping down and kicking out, knocking one Firestarter off his feet, before rolling and leaping up to punch a second in the face, before ducking and throwing herself at the third, ramming his head into the wall. She dropped him to the ground after a second, before turning to punch the first in the face again as he got to his feet.

Joyce watched for a second, before turning her attention to the second arsonist, who’d just stood up again. She took a breath,

preparing to rush forwards and fight her, too, only to stop as, faster than she could believe, the arsonist had drawn a lighter, flipping it open. Joyce froze, staring at her, as Kali managed to knock out her adversary and also noticed what was going on.

“You’d set your headquarters on fire?” Kali asked, narrowing her eyes.

“It’s called a warning, kid.” the Firestarter said. “To get out.”

Kali narrowed her eyes, possibly realizing that this arsonist wasn’t bluffing. Of course it wouldn’t bother her, she could move through fire if need be... but Will might still be in the building, and he wouldn’t be so lucky.

She rushed forwards, but before she could reach the arsonist, the lighter dropped.

Will was getting really tired of hiding.

He’d run, looking for his Mom, or Hopper, or those other two teens, but instead he’d just had to run down to the next floor and duck into an empty room when he was almost spotted by two arsonists. And he definitely didn’t want to set *this* room on fire, so if the arsonists could just pass so he could run some more, that’d be great.

Though, to be honest, he wasn’t sure how much farther he could get. He just needed to find help. He could probably just run out the of the building, but he wasn’t sure how far he’d get; there seemed to be a forest outside, and he didn’t know how long he could survive in there. There might be a town nearby, but it could be occupied by arsonists.

Who was in the building again? Chief Hopper, three teens he didn’t know, his Mom... his *Mom* ...

He wondered what was in that file that the man- Brenner?- had given to him, the one that was still in his jacket. What had his Mom done to piss everyone off so much? It couldn’t be that bad, his Mom wouldn’t... she wouldn’t do something *really* shitty. She wasn’t evil,

she wasn't even bad. Not even close. She was *great* and she was here, she was here looking for him and he couldn't...

He heard people running down the hall, and tensed at the door, reaching to grab the handle in case they tried to enter the room. But they just moved past, yelling something, and he had to lean in to be able to hear what they were saying.

"-*know* who set it, I just know there's a fire on the top floor, we need to get damage control there *stat* so we don't go down like a Volunteer base. We can worry about-"

Will froze for a second, trying to figure out who would've set a fire in their own headquarters, but he didn't have much time to think. He waited until the footsteps were gone before opening the door again, peering out before running again, still gripping the broom handle as he rushed down the hall, wishing that he had a weapon that wasn't so useless, and really wishing that he knew where the next staircase was.

Will turned a bend, and ran straight into someone. He realized, when an unknown voice started cursing and a rough hand pushed him away, that it wasn't someone he knew.

"Shit!" Will yelled, turning to run in the opposite direction, only for the Arsonist to grab his arm and drag him back. He let out a scream as the hand gripped his burn, accidentally dropping his broom handle in shock, and he heard a voice say, "Holy shit, kid, what are you doing down here?"

"Let me go!" Will screamed, trying to break away, dropping to try and reach his weapon.

"What the hell are you-"

"Piss off!" Will yelled, panic taking over. "Leave me alone!"

"Shut up!" the arsonist said, starting to look pissed.

"Get off of me!" Will yelled, still struggling with his arm. "Get off me, get o-"

The arsonist suddenly gasped, and Will paused as he saw something bounce off his attacker's back; as he glanced down to the ground, he saw that it was a rock.

"What the—" the arsonist began, only to let out another gasp, as a small dagger suddenly landed in his shoulder. His grip slackened, and while it wasn't quite enough for Will to break free, he managed to move himself enough to a good look of what was behind the arsonist.

"Get away from him!" Mike screamed, as next to him, Lucas re-loaded his wrist-rocket, Max raised her bat, and some girl Will didn't recognize raised another knife. Behind them, Dustin stood behind Jonathan, who had his eyes locked on his brother.

Will figured he should probably yell for them, or cry, or something. But instead, he just stared, a sudden relief washing over him.

They're here.

The arsonist turned, confusion washing over his gaze, and Max decided that she'd waited long enough, as she screamed and rushed forwards, hitting him with the bat. Mike rushed forwards, too, almost ripping the guy's arm away from Will and pushing his friend behind him.

"Max!" Jonathan yelled, as the Arsonist managed to grab the swinging bat, trying to rip it away. Dustin rushed forwards, too, and both boys almost tackled the Arsonist away from her, while Lucas ran forwards to stand beside her, raising his wrist-rocket again in case of threat. The girl Will didn't know rushed over towards them at first, a slight limp in her leg, but eventually she just moved back towards Will and Mike, staring at Will as if she couldn't believe he existed.

Jonathan stepped back, and Will realized that, while he'd been watching Max, Lucas and the girl, he and Dustin must've shoved the arsonist into the wall enough to knock him out, because he was now on the ground, still breathing raggedly but not getting up.

There was a pause, as everyone calmed down from the sudden adrenaline rush. Then, Mike turned to Will, eyes wide. "Will? Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Will looked around, as the rest of the Party turned to him.

They looked exhausted, and worried, and a little bit dirty. But they were okay.

They were *here*.

Will started to cry, and Jonathan rushed over, and in an instant he had his arms around him, hugging him tight, and then Mike was hugging him, too. Max, Lucas and Dustin rushed over, and Will could feel them all hugging him in a comforting, relieved silence. This was as safe as he'd felt since this whole trouble started, and he didn't want it to end.

"Are you okay?" Jonathan asked.

"A little burned." Will admitted through his sobs. "A little scared."

"It's okay, we're here." Dustin said.

"Yeah, we're kinda badass now." Max said.

They broke the hug, and Mike said, "When you left, we were on the run for like a week—"

"And both sides of VFD were trying to get us!" Lucas interrupted.

"You know about VFD?" Will asked.

"Yeah, kinda hard not to." Dustin said. "But we got picked up by Kali—"

"She and her Gang are a bunch of rebels." Max explained.

"And they're gonna take us somewhere safe!" Lucas said.

"And your Mom's here!" Dustin added.

"And Chief Hopper." Mike said. "And my long-lost sister."

"Turns out she *wasn't* dead." Dustin said. "Oh, and we got El."

Will turned to the girl, eyes widening. "Oh, from the radio."

El waved.

“Yeah, she’s a *total* badass.” Dustin said.

“She helped us escape VFD.” Mike added. “She’s a runaway, too, but from the Firestarters.”

Will looked up at Jonathan, asking, “Where’s everyone else?”

“They’re in here. We’ve gotta signal them somehow.” Jonathan said. “Tell them we got you, that more arsonists are coming-”

“More *what*?” Will asked.

As if on cue, they heard footsteps rushing towards them, and they all immediately put up their guard again. Jonathan pushed Will behind him, and El stood behind Mike, flipping a knife in her hand.

“Who is it?” Max asked, raising the bat.

“Just stay calm, and if I tell you to run, you better listen.” Jonathan said quickly.

“Jonathan?” Will said quietly, reaching to grab his brother’s arm.

“Just stay calm, Will. Stick with us, you’re gonna be okay.” Jonathan said quickly.

They were silent for a moment, tensing up and preparing to fight, only to sigh and relax when the people approaching finally turned the bend. Will even smiled slightly, when he saw Chief Hopper rush into view, before dropping his gun and saying, “What the *hell* are you doing here?”

“We came for Will.” Mike said, as a teenager rushed next to Hopper. “And there’s an issue-”

“They’ve got reinforcements.” Max said. “Outside. Probably coming in. Everyone needs to get out.”

“Nancy’s up a floor.” the teenager said. “And Byers and Kali are closer to the top.”

“Mom’s upstairs?” Will asked, eyes wide.

Hopper and the teenager stared at him for a second, and then the teen said, “Wait, is this the kid?”

“Yeah, this is Will.” Mike said.

“Will, this is Steve.” Jonathan said. “Steve, Will.”

“Alright, you kids get out.” Hopper said. “We’ll get the others, get back to the hotel-”

“We can help!” Max said. “We knocked out a guy, he’s over there.”

“That doesn’t-” Hopper began.

“Holy shit, nice job.” Steve interrupted. “We heard a lot of yelling, didn’t know it was from you guys beating the shit outta-”

“No, we’re not celebrating this.” Hopper said. “Steve, you find Nancy, I’ll get Joyce and Kali.”

“We want to help!” Dustin added.

“Yeah, I want to help Mom!” Will said.

“This is non-negotiable, you kids are getting *out* of here!” Hopper said quickly. “Just go, we’ll meet you when we’ve regrouped.”

“What if you get in trouble?” Lucas asked.

“Then *you* won’t be there.” Hopper said. “Now go!”

“Come on, kids.” Jonathan said hesitantly. “Back down the stairs.”

Max huffed, while Lucas and Dustin rolled their eyes, but eventually, they all left, as Hopper and Steve ran in the opposite direction.

“Guys, we do need to get Will somewhere safe.” Jonathan said.

“I wanna help...” Will protested.

“Will, you’ve been held captive for a week, just escaped arsonists,

and they'll be okay, Mom's really well trained. We just need to get you back to our base."

The kids glanced at each other, and then Mike said, "Okay. Okay, let's go."

They kept Will and El in the middle of the group as they rushed back towards the stairwell, which was just down two halls.

They should've been able to make it.

But after a second, Will stopped moving, leaning against the wall. The rest turned towards him when they realized he'd ducked away from them, and he said, "Don't worry, just... leg doesn't feel good. It got burned."

They all looked worried at that, except for El, who just nodded sympathetically. "Mine got stabbed." she shared.

"Oh." Will said.

Then they heard it.

Above them, the floor rumbled. The kids and Jonathan looked confused, glancing up. El, meanwhile, backed up wildly, looking panicked.

"The hell is that?" Max asked.

Mike noticed El, turning towards her worriedly. "El? What's-"

"Bad sound." she said. "Fire. Fire above us, the ceiling-"

The rumbling grew louder, and Jonathan was the first to react, rushing forwards to grab Will's unburned arm, yelling, "Go, go, go-"

Just as the Byers brothers turned around, the ceiling collapsed.

49. The Byers Family Reunion goes Horribly Wrong

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

The Byers Family Reunion goes Horribly Wrong

Jonathan screamed, immediately turning Will around and shielding him from the falling debris. Will simply gasped, shutting his eyes and trying to keep himself from listening, sure he would hear his friends' screams. But instead, he heard more surprised gasps, a bit muffled. Nothing that sounded too painful.

After a second, the brothers opened their eyes and turned, to see that the remains of the ceiling had completely collapsed in front of them, and were still very much on fire.

"Fuck!" Jonathan yelled, pushing Will back farther. "Kids! Kids, are you-"

"We're fine!" came Lucas's voice, from somewhere behind the flames. "We're okay, are you alright?"

Jonathan glanced towards Will, who was staring at the fire with rapt attention. "Y-yes. Look, get to the stairs, we'll find another way out!"

"But-" Mike began, but the flames started spreading, and Will and Jonathan had to back up, and they didn't catch what he was saying.

"Just run!" Jonathan yelled. "We'll meet you outside!"

"Jonathan..." Will said, staring at the flames.

"Just move, Will, I'll get you out, I promise." Jonathan said, grabbing his hand. "Come on, let's find another stairwell..."

"I don't know, I don't..." Will sputtered. "I... the only one I found goes up, I don't know the way down..."

"We'll find a way, just keep running." Jonathan said. "We're getting

out of here, don't worry."

"What the fuck are we gonna do?" Lucas asked, backing up from the flames.

Mike glanced around the ground, making sure they were okay again. El had managed to drag him away from the flames the second the ceiling fell, so she was in front of him, staring at the fire and glancing side-to-side, as if hoping to find something to put it out. Lucas and Max were grabbing onto each others' arms, backing up and looking panicked. Dustin looked frozen, and after a second, he ran his hand through his hair and said, "We're on our own again. We're on our own..."

Mike took a deep breath, and then said, "Yes. We're on our own again. But we're not in trouble. We've got people everywhere who are going to protect us. And we're getting out of here, okay? We're getting out."

They turned towards him, and he said, "Okay, we've got to get out of here; Jonathan and the Chief are right, the best thing we can do is get the hell out, now that we know Will is safe."

"He might not be, the stairs are that way." Max muttered.

"He's with Jonathan, they can find Hopper and Steve." Mike assured her. "They'll be okay, they've gotta be okay. We need to get out. El, do you need help running?"

She hesitated before shaking her head.

"Okay. Everyone hold hands again." Mike said. "We gotta make it to the stairwell, get back out through a window, and hide until Jonathan and Will get out. We can make it. Just run, before the fire spreads farther."

They turned and took off, grabbing each others' hands and moving as fast as they could.

"This," Kali said carefully, "Is not the worst thing that could have happened."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Joyce said, turning towards her, "What exactly could have gone worse?"

They'd managed to make it down a floor, but the fire was spreading fast, and the ceiling didn't seem like it'd hold much longer, if it hadn't fallen already.

"Well, we haven't run into Brenner, we're still alive, and Will can't be much farther away." Kali said.

"The Firestarters definitely know we're in the building, though. They could take Will anywhere." Joyce said worriedly. "Especially if they know there's a fire, they could take the tunnels out."

"Then we'll go in the tunnels, kill everyone guarding him, and get him the hell out of town." Kali said. "Simple."

"Not simple." Joyce said.

They heard yelling, and Joyce grabbed Kali's arm and dragged her down another hall. They peered around the bend, seeing several arsonists run past, without Will. Joyce watched them go for a second, her face falling.

"Recognize some of them?" Kali asked cautiously. Joyce shook her head. "Well, I do. Assholes, the whole lot."

"That's probably the majority of people here." Joyce muttered. "Come on, we have to get to Will before this whole place goes up in flames."

"They'll put the fire out." Kali said, though she didn't sound convinced. "Before it spreads too far."

"It's spread far enough." Joyce said, moving out of the hall and walking as Kali ran to catch up with her. "And if they know there's a fire, they'll move Will, unless he gets out first."

"He wouldn't be out for long." Kali said sharply. "He's untrained, and

they're used to handling Phoenix kids. Unless he's very good at running, he'll-"

"Stop." Joyce said, holding up a hand and stopping in place.

They both paused, hearing more people rush down the hall. They pressed themselves against the wall, waiting for someone to turn around.

However, whoever was in the next hall slowed, breathing hard. Kali looked a bit confused, but Joyce just froze, her eyes widening.

"I'm *sorry!*" came a voice she recognized immediately. "I'm sorry, my leg hurts!"

"Buddy, we need to keep moving," came another voice. "We need to get out."

"What the hell is Jonathan doing here?" Kali whispered, but Joyce didn't respond.

Instead, Joyce moved, rushing out of the hall, turning the bend and sliding to a stop. Only a few feet away, Jonathan and Will looked up, shocked.

There was a silence, and then, as Kali walked up behind them, watching carefully. Finally, Will said, "*Mom?*"

Joyce rushed ahead, and threw her arms around her sons, hugging them as tightly as she could. Will hugged her back instantly, starting to cry a little, while Jonathan hesitated a second, and then whispered, "Sorry I'm here."

"We can talk about that later." Joyce said, pulling away slightly and examining Will, flinching when she saw his arm. "What did they do to you?"

"It's just a burn." Will said hesitantly. "Are you okay?"

"Am I-?" Joyce laughed slightly. "Will, worry about yourself. You're... oh, God, I'm gonna kill them all..."

“Get in line.” Kali said, crossing her arms slightly and eying Will.

“Who’s that?” Will asked.

“That’s Kali.” Jonathan explained quickly. “Kal, we’ve gotta get everyone out of the building, they’ve got reinforcements coming in.”

“Damn.” Kali said.

“Is that why you’re here? Did they go after you?” Joyce asked worriedly.

“Uh...” Jonathan said. “More like the kids won’t take no for an answer.”

“The kids are here?” Kali and Joyce both said.

“Uh...” Will and Jonathan stared at them for a second, and then Will said, “They’re waiting outside. Probably?”

“Probably?” Kali asked. “Ugh, you know what- you three get out. I’ll get Hop, Steve and Nancy and meet you outside.”

“We shouldn’t split up farther-” Joyce began.

“I’ll be fine.” Kali said stiffly. She glanced at Will, said, “Nice to see you’re alive,” and rushed out.

“Okay, okay.” Joyce said quickly. “Okay, this is fine. Will, can you move?”

“I...” he hesitated. “Yeah, yeah, I can run if we need to.”

“Good, we’ll need to.” Joyce said. “But we’ll be right here if you need us, okay? Okay, I’m not letting them get to you, I’m not leaving you again.”

Will stared at her for a second, and then he started crying, and he slowly reached into his jacket, pulling out a file and handing it to his Mom. She looked down at it, and paled.

“I didn’t read it.” Will said quickly. “I don’t know...”

“Who gave you this?” she asked quietly, looking intently at her name etched onto the cover.

“S-some guy. I dunno.” Will said quickly. “It doesn’t matter, I don’t... I don’t know what’s in it.”

Joyce bit her lip, looking between Will and Jonathan. And then, slowly, she handed the file back to Will. “Mom?” he asked.

“It’s okay, you can... you can read it.” she said softly, turning to look at Jonathan as she continued, “I can’t keep lying to you.”

“It... it can’t be that bad.” Will said quietly. “You wouldn’t-”

“Oh, baby.” Joyce said carefully, “I’ve done horrible things. I have, and I’m sorry. I can’t tell you I didn’t.”

“But that doesn’t matter.” Jonathan said suddenly, leaning down to give his brother a quick hug. “It doesn’t matter, you’ve done everything you can to make things right. And... and VFD can go fuck themselves.”

Will jumped at his brother cursing, and then laughed slightly. Joyce, feeling about ready to cry, laughed too.

But then Will looked over Joyce’s shoulder, and he stopped laughing. He froze for a second, and then he took a step back, suddenly looking terrified.

Jonathan followed Will’s gaze, and then he immediately stepped in front of his brother. Joyce suddenly got a very bad feeling, and she didn’t have to turn around to know what Will was looking at.

But she did anyway.

And she thought she’d be scared. She really did, she’d been terrified the entire day, the entire *week*. Hell, she’d been terrified for years that this exact thing would happen.

But Will was behind her, and Will was terrified. And Jonathan tried not to show it, but she could tell he was scared, too.

And she couldn't afford to be scared when she had to protect them.

So, very slowly, she stood up, stepped in front of Jonathan, and said, "Well, Lonnie Byers is halfway sober. It's a miracle."

The kids made it into the stairwell fine, and they even made it to the main floor without running into any arsonists.

Which, of course, meant that they were paranoid as hell.

"You'd think they'd be evacuating, because of the fire." Dustin said quickly. "Or coming up to deal with it. Why are the stairs so empty?"

"Shut up," Max said, flipping her bat in her hands, "There's probably another stairwell somewhere."

"Or we got lucky." Mike said.

"We're *not* lucky. We lost Will again, *and* Jonathan." Lucas said. "What happens if we go outside and they never come out? What if *nobody* comes out for us?"

"Kali's Gang's not here." El said softly, as they walked towards the door that would lead them out into the hall. "They're probably outside."

"Yeah, they'll take care of us." Mike said. "Funshine and Mick, at least. Dottie and Axel don't seem to like us much."

"I think Dottie liked me a bit." Max said.

"Are we really having this conversation?" Lucas asked.

"You're right." Mike said. "It's dumb, because everyone's gonna get out of the building and find us."

El glanced towards everyone, and then opened the door. They walked out into the hall hesitantly, even though they heard some loud crashing coming from a few halls down. They glanced at each other, even as they kept moving forwards, almost numb to the noise. They

wouldn't have to approach it, they just needed to find a window to climb out of...

"Son of a *bitch*!" came a scream from the direction of the noise.

And then Mike whispered, "Nancy!" He turned to the rest of the group, and said quickly, "We have to help her! What if she's in trouble?"

"Yes, we can do something useful!" Dustin said, as the kids rushed off towards the sound of Mike's sister.

"I'm going to need you," Joyce said, very sternly, "To get away from my kids."

Will was grabbing onto Jonathan's leg, terrified that if he looked away, his Dad would do something. He remembered how scared his Mom was of this man, how Jonathan said his few memories of him were horrible, how he felt just *talking* to him... and he *really* wanted to run. He wanted to run with his Mom and his brother and never look back.

Lonnie didn't even look that threatening, but Will was still scared. He was simply standing at the end of the hall, glaring daggers at Joyce, who slowly stepped forwards.

"Mom-" Jonathan began.

"We're leaving." Joyce said, still looking ahead, almost eerily calm. "And we're not coming back."

"We can't allow that." Lonnie said darkly. "You may have given up on our organization, but-"

"Given up?" Joyce said, rolling her eyes and huffing, as if he'd said something completely stupid, instead of utterly terrifying. "You make it sound like I dropped a homework assignment. This is a goddamn cult, Lonnie, and I'm not letting my children get sucked into this."

"You did give up." Lonnie said. "You couldn't handle everything you

needed to do, Joyce. You were always too weak for this.”

Joyce paused for a second, and then she stepped forwards again, now only a few feet from her ex-husband. Will started shaking, grabbing onto Jonathan tighter as his brother’s eyes darted towards the other hall, wondering if they could make a break for it, but... not without their Mom.

“Don’t you dare,” Joyce said, her voice sounding like a wolf’s growl, “Call me weak ever again.”

Suddenly, Will could understand why everyone didn’t like to talk about her. They were *scared* of her. She was terrifying. She was more terrifying than Lonnie. Which meant that he didn’t stand a goddamn chance. And that made Will less scared, if only for a moment.

“You knew what you were signing up for.” Lonnie said.

“I was a *child*.”

“You understood the Volunteers, and you understood the Arsonists. You think you’re the only one who’s ever been hurt in this business? I’ve burned bridges for these people-”

“Both literally and figuratively, I am aware.” Joyce said, and, slowly, she reached her hand into her pocket. Lonnie didn’t notice. But Jonathan and Will did.

“We are fighting fire with fire, Joyce. We all make sacrifices for the greater good.”

“The sacrifice doesn’t have to be forcing children to do your dirty work! Why can’t you understand?”

She finally found what she was looking for in her pocket, slowly pulling her hand out, just far enough so the item was barely visible. Once again, Lonnie didn’t notice. And, once again, the boys did. And Will and Jonathan both paled, something instantly clicking in their minds.

Oh.

“I understand plenty, Joyce. I understand that you were too scared of getting your hands dirtier to fully commit to the organization, and you’ve fucked up with our kids in the meantime.” Lonnie looked straight at Will, who paled. “The kid’s too wild, Joyce, but we will make him into one of us. He’s valuable. And *you* are not.”

Will suddenly felt a flash of fear again, as his Dad stepped closer to his Mom. He opened his mouth to call out a warning, beg her to run, they didn’t know what kind of weapons Lonnie had, what he could do...

But before Will or Jonathan could say anything, Joyce said, in that unnerving voice, “I think you’re forgetting something, Lonnie.”

He paused for a second, as she shut her eyes and pulled her hand completely out of her pocket, bringing the match with it. She struck it against her leg, the small flame flickering to life.

“I was burning bridges right along with you.”

And, with a final glare, she threw the match, turned around towards her sons, and ran like the wind.

50. Joyce Doesn't Like to think about her Childhood

CHAPTER FIFTY

Joyce Doesn't Like to think about her Childhood

Joyce had seen too many fires.

She knew her house burned down soon after she'd been recruited, but the first fire she'd actually seen was when she was eight. The Firestarters had found the house her and some other students were taking their Stealth Exams in, and lit it while they were all in the attic. They'd managed to get out fine, but Joyce had been the last kid to get out, mostly due to her ducking back to make sure none of the kids had panicked and hidden in the closet, and having to drag poor Andrea and Frida out and shove them towards the window, before dropping herself, unable to see much of the room or how far up she was, due to the smoke.

But once they were all out, and their chaperone also got out and led them somewhere safe, Joyce looked back and stared at the fire, completely consuming the house.

It wasn't as scary as she'd thought it would be. Well, it was a bit unnerving, but at the same time... the fire was also kinda pretty.

Every time she saw a fire- when her Chaperones were called in to help put out a burning building, when the Firestarters caught up to them, when someone dropped a candle or decided to sneak a smoke at the wrong time- she always felt more drawn to it. Not because she liked setting fires, or because it was particularly enjoyable to watch the Firefighters get more and more pissed, but because she needed some way to rebel.

Rebellion was hard in VFD, probably by design. All Volunteers were to be trusted, everyone outside the society was either out to hurt them or too unintelligent to help. A lot of her peers seemed to buy into everything that was told to them, too- when she brought up the

possibility of one of their teachers simply being misinformed on a subject, she remembered Zack and Olivia just staring at her as if she'd started speaking another language. And it wasn't as if the teachers were going to give her an outlet for her aggression, outside of combat training, which was contained, and practiced, and too safe.

She took up smoking first. She bought some cigarettes off of one of the older girls and would smoke on the roof with Lonnie. He was in her classes, they both kept each others' secrets. And he wanted to rebel, too. He rebelled more, though; he started setting fires to small papers or wrappers on the roof, and Joyce never asked him to stop.

He ran off with the Arsonists while Joyce was with her Chaperones in Hawkins. And, when her apprenticeship was almost over, he showed up and asked her if she could help him with some things.

And then she started seeing more and more fires.

She didn't officially join the Firestarters right away, but that didn't mean she didn't help. Because she hated her Chaperones, hated her Teachers, *hated* the other Volunteers. So, who cared if she dropped information on where some headquarters were? Who cared if she "accidentally" dropped a lit cigarette into the laundry? Who cared if she started selling matches to the younger kids, younger kids who also were sick of sitting still and following orders?

But when she was Nineteen, and Lonnie finally came to extract her from Headquarters, and she watched the building burn behind her, she started to feel sick.

Can't go back now, she'd thought. *Can't go back now, because I'm on the other side. They won't take me back. And nobody outside can help me.*

But things kept getting worse.

Because at first she was starting fires with everyone, no matter how it made her feel. Starting fires, doing heists, sneaking into places and going undercover. It was like the Volunteers, but nobody expected her to be perfect. Well, at least, not perfect like the Volunteers.

But they started to notice when she got uncomfortable. When she

hesitated before striking the match, when she accidentally let Volunteers get out of the building before sending it crashing down. And so she was let on less missions, put under more supervision.

Which meant she spent more time with Lonnie.

And before she knew it, she was trapped again, with no way to rebel. And all she could do was keep thinking about everything she'd done. She'd done horrible things, was still *doing* horrible things, things she couldn't think about, *couldn't* let her kids know about.

And then she saw Lonnie teaching Jonathan how to light a fire, and she knew she had to run.

But she couldn't go back to the Volunteers, and none of the Arsonists would help her. The Firefighters not only would not trust her ever again, they were just as bad as the Firestarters. They destroyed, they flooded, they poisoned, they *burned*, they just said it was for the best. They couldn't see that they were doing anything wrong. And she had no doubt in her mind that they'd recruit her sons, and when she realized that, she realized something else. She found out she didn't want to let her kids go through the same things she had. She wanted something different for them. She wanted them to choose what they wanted to do.

So she called up the Volunteers she'd been closest to, when Lonnie wasn't home. Pretended she wanted to switch sides again- better, even: the Firestarters had kidnapped her. They believed her, and she felt like shit for deceiving them, but she really needed to get out. They left her a car she could hijack to take her to a meeting place. She went in the opposite direction and took a train, taking along her boys. Will had slept almost the whole time, while Jonathan kept asking where they were going, when Dad would meet them, why they'd have to leave so late. By the time they'd gotten to a place she thought might be safe, by the time she got her boys into the house, she finally told Jonathan that Dad wasn't going to talk to them anymore, he was hurting them, they'd needed to leave. It broke her heart that he hadn't seemed surprised, that he just nodded and asked if he could help her set up a crib for Will.

She'd hoped that she'd never see a fire again. But now she was

running again, and her boys were next to her, and there was a fire behind her and a fire ahead.

“How are we going to get out?” Will asked, sounding completely panicked.

Joyce scanned the halls, finally finding a door that looked good. She threw herself against it until it opened, glanced around to make sure nobody was in there, and then said, “Will, can you climb out a window?”

“Uh, I don’t... think so?” Will admitted, glancing at his arm as he and Jonathan ran up behind her.

Joyce moved to the window and opened it. “Can you hold onto me?”

“Maybe?”

“We’re going to try that. Jonathan?”

“I think I can make it.”

Joyce paused. “I’m gonna go down with Will first. Wait a minute, then follow.”

Jonathan nodded, and Joyce said, “Alright. Now, be careful. I’m not losing either of you today.”

“*Nancy!*”

Nancy turned around, saw the kids standing just at the end of the hall, and said, “Goddamnit,” before getting punched in the face again.

She’d been able to drive the Arsonists away from Will, sure, but that meant she’d had to get them to chase her down the stairs, which was easy enough once they were provoked. She’d planned to get Steve and Hopper’s attention, but they’d been chasing her too fast and she’d had to get to the first floor, and they’d caught up before she’d gotten through the window. She could take a few punches, though.

She'd done it before. The cut she'd gotten on her side might be a problem later, but it didn't seem to be bleeding too bad. Besides, she'd managed to hit them quite a few times.

One of the Arsonists looked towards the kids, narrowing his eyes. "Hold on- Jane?"

El froze, panic flashing in her eyes. Mike immediately glanced down and pulled a loose floorboard up, rushing forwards and trying to hit the man with it. The Arsonist managed to grab the board, and Mike glared at him, struggling to keep him from ripping it from his hands, yelling, "Leave her *alone*!"

"What the-" the Arsonist said, confused.

"Mike, you idiot!" Max rushed forwards with the bat, closely followed by Lucas, who stopped just short of Nancy and loaded his wrist-rocket with a rock and shot it at the second arsonist. She swung her bat at the firestarter, who had to let go of Mike's floorboard to defend himself.

Max and Mike both attacked, while the second arsonist went towards Lucas, who kept rushing backwards, still shooting rocks. Dustin ran towards Nancy, helping her up and saying, "You're bleeding. Do you need help?"

"What the hell are you doing here?" Nancy asked.

"Uh..."

El finally recovered from her initial shock and ran past them, attacking the person who was after Lucas. She managed to avoid a grab for her arm, and instead spun and kicked out.

"Jesus Christ." Dustin said, noticing the scratch on Nancy's side. "Do you have bandages with you?"

"What do you think?" Nancy groaned. "I'll be fine-"

"You won't be fine." Dustin said. "Not if you don't get help soon."

"I've survived worse."

“Doesn’t mean this still can’t kill you.”

El finally managed to knock the arsonist into the wall, and Lucas lowered the wrist rocket and ran up behind her, waiting until he was sure the opponent was knocked out before grabbing her hand, dragging her back a bit. They glanced towards Max and Mike, who were still trying to attack the arsonist with their weapons, only managing to get a few hits before the attacker could dodge. El released Lucas and ran forwards, knocking the firestarter from behind and then leaping on top of him, dragging his head back by his hair before slamming it into the floor. She paused for a second, and then jumped up.

“You knocked him out?” Mike asked, and when El nodded, he turned to Nancy, looking worried. “Are you okay?”

“She is not.” Dustin said.

“We’ll get you out, don’t worry.” Max said. “Come on, we just have to get out a window, we can patch you up in the woods.”

“That’ll be easier said than done.” Lucas said. “There’ll be Firestarters all over.”

“We’ll figure something out.” Dustin said. “Everything’ll be okay.”

“What are you even doing here?” Nancy asked.

“Wanted to make sure you didn’t die.” Mike said simply. “And then we saw fires and reinforcements and decided to come in.”

“Where’s Jonathan?”

“Upstairs with Will.” El said simply.

“Why aren’t you-”

“Part of the ceiling fell and set on fire.” Lucas said.

“Oh. That wasn’t me.”

“It doesn’t matter who set the fire,” Mike said, “What matters is-

here!”

He opened a door in the hall, seeing what seemed to be some kind of meeting room. He rushed to a window, and tried to open it. “Fuck, it’s locked. El?”

El ran forwards, and Mike said, “Can you unlock it?”

She paused, then pushed him aside, grabbed a chair, and smashed it through the window.

“Okay, uh, that works.” Mike said, as El reached through the hole and managed to find something that pushed the rest of the window up. “Guys, climb through, and watch out for glass shards.”

“This isn’t the first smashed window I’ve gotten through, Wheeler.” Max said, as they all entered the room, with Lucas stopping to shove a chair under the door handle. “I’m not an amateur.”

“Hold on a second.” Nancy said, before pulling a handheld radio out of her pocket. “Hello? Anyone here? This is Nancy, do you copy?”

After a second, they heard Steve’s voice. “Yeah, me and Hop are here. What’s going on?”

“I’ve got the kids, we’re getting out.” Nancy said. “Are Kali and Byers there?”

“No, we’re trying to find them. They’re not answering the radio.”

“Okay. Meet you outside.” Nancy said, and then she stuck her head out the window, peering out to make certain there was nobody in eyesight. After a moment, she climbed out and said, “Okay, come on out, kids.”

Dustin moved out first, still looking warily at Nancy’s wound. Max almost leapt out, looking very excited, followed by Lucas, who temporarily stuffed his wrist-rocket into his pocket so he could use both hands to climb through.

“Okay, El, you go next.” Mike said quickly. “Then, once we’re out, we never have to come to this place again, and-”

“Wait!” Nancy called, suddenly holding out a hand. Mike and El both froze, as she was staring somewhere in the distance. Slowly, she said, “Max, Lucas, Dustin. Get behind me. *Now.*”

“What’s going on?” Mike asked, suddenly worried.

“I thought I saw someone.” Nancy began. “Just stay put, I’ll take care of-”

She took a step forwards and stumbled, letting out a hiss and grabbing at her side.

“Nancy?” Mike asked, moving to climb out the window.

“I’m fi-” Nancy suddenly spotted something, just outside of Mike’s sight, and her eyes widened. She immediately turned, pushing the other kids away, and she yelled, “Mike, El, *run!* Get away from the window! *Run!*”

“What?” Mike asked, as El took a step back fearfully. “What’s going on?”

“Mike!” El grabbed his hand, trying to drag him away from the window.

“What’s going *on*-?”

They spotted something fall outside the window, and then a split second later, something exploded.

Mike, instinctively, grabbed El and whipped around, covering her as best he could.

So he got hit by the fire first.

Notes for the Chapter:

Me, writing this fic: I haven't set Mike on fire since "Shatter." Time to fix that.

51. El Does a Dance

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

El Does a Dance

“Holy *shit*, Kal!”

Kali glanced up, pushing her hair out of her eyes to see Steve and Hopper. She lowered the gun, glancing around the arsonists who’d tried to attack her, lying on the ground, and said, “Don’t worry. I knew them. They thought kicking me around was fun.”

“Where’s Joyce?” Hopper asked.

“She got Will, and she’s on her way out.” Kali said. “And I came to find you. And since I seem to have done so, we should get out of this building before it completely burns down.”

“Nancy says she found the kids, too.” Steve said. “Says they’re almost out.”

“Good.” Kali sighed. “The last thing I want is for Jane to get stuck here. Thank God those kids are alright.”

“*Mike!*”

El had dragged him into the hall, away from the fire, and managed to put out the flames that had attached to his clothes, but he still wasn’t waking up. She was sobbing now, and she hated that, she’d tried for as long as she could remember not to cry, she normally despised showing weakness like this. But she didn’t care right now. All she cared about was the fact that Mike *wasn’t moving*.

“Mike! Mike, please, wake *up!*”

They were in the hall, they were in plain sight. Anyone could see

them. Anyone could capture them. But it was safer than the room that was on fire. And El didn't know how far she could carry him, unless she could do that Fireman's Carry, but she wasn't great at that, and she hadn't practiced since she'd had siblings.

"Mike, please, I need you. Wake up. Please."

She shut her eyes, bracing herself for the worst, and moved her hand to his arm, feeling for a pulse. She waited for a second, still sobbing, and then she breathed a sigh of relief. He was breathing, if very slowly. He was alive.

But he wasn't unhurt. His back and arms had gotten burned, as well as parts of the top of his legs. El didn't dare look at the injuries too closely- even after years of training with the Firestarters, burned skin still made her feel sick. She knew she wasn't supposed to take clothes off of burned skin, but part of his jacket and shirt had burned in the back so she'd slipped her jacket over that. She was panicking, and the treatment for burn scars was slipping her mind. It probably didn't matter, she doubted she'd find anything useful in this hellhole...

"...El?"

El gasped, looking up. Mike had fluttered his eyes open, just barely. "Mike!" she said, beaming, kneeling more so she could get eye-level with him. "Mike, are you okay?"

He shut his eyes again, his breathing ragged, and then he shook his head. "Hurts." was all he managed to say.

"It'll be okay." El said quickly struggling to believe it. "I'll get you out. I'll get you safe."

"El-" He was struggling to stay awake, she could tell. He was probably about to pass out again. "El, I-"

"Shh. Don't talk. Stay awake." El said. "I'll find Nancy, or Jonathan, or... or..."

She fell silent, before turning slowly towards the end of the hall. Two people had turned the bend, and after a second, they took off running. She stood up, her first instinct being to go after them, but...

no, no, she had to get Mike out of the building.

But the way the two people had gone was the way to the doors, and the other end of the hall just led to the stairwell. She might be able to find another room with a window, but she didn't know how long they had.

She did have an idea, but it could backfire in so many ways.

But what choice did she have?

"Mike, this is going to be scary." El said carefully, slowly moving her hands under his arms. "I'm going to lift you, and move you. Just stay down, and trust me. And be brave."

Mike nodded, and El wondered if he could process what she was saying. She had to hope he could, otherwise he was about to get very scared.

She raised him to his feet, and then lifted Mike over her shoulders, grabbing his right hand with hers so that she could keep a steady grip on him. He flinched a little whenever she touched one of his injuries, but didn't look scared.

El took a deep breath, then opened her eyes again, and let her training take over.

She could do this. She'd done it before.

She opened the door to the room again, seeing that it was almost entirely engulfed in flames now. She flinched at the heat, but... they could take it. They'd only be there a short time.

Time to dance.

It was a bit stressful, sure, having to take care of added weight while she moved, jumping between fire, scanning her eyes for big enough dry spots for them to jump to. It was a bit of an issue that one of her legs was still hurting, and the pain in her wound flared up whenever it got a bit too hot. And it didn't help that smoke was filling the room, meaning she could only see a little bit, if at all; there were patches where she couldn't see anything. But she could feel, and she

could feel where there was less heat, less chance of burning. She'd been trained for this her entire life, and she could damn well dance a little bit if it meant she could get Mike somewhere safe.

She rammed her foot into the wall, and flinched for only a second, before looking for the window. She spotted it quickly- thankfully the smoke was going out that way. She used her free hand to push herself up onto the ledge, and slowly climb out.

The second they were on the grass, El let out a curse, realizing there was more fire to get through. But she kept her head down, kept dancing, kept spinning and ducking and leaping through the fire, and after a second, she started to feel colder.

Which was a great sign.

She opened her eyes, realizing that the smoke had finally cleared, and she was just on the edge of the woods. She slowly moved towards a tree, and then she placed Mike down.

"We're safe." she said quietly.

Mike smiled slightly, opening his eyes and visibly relaxing.

"Does it still hurt?" she asked.

He paused, before saying, "Yeah. But I'll... we need to find the Party."

"Mike-" she began, before cutting herself off. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a group of people approaching from behind them. She turned, and then immediately leapt to her feet, blocking Mike as best she could.

Behind them, several feet away, was a group of arsonists. A group she recognized. Specifically, she recognized the man in the front most of all.

They stopped walking when they realized she noticed them. They were frozen, staring at each other for a moment, and then El looked her Papa in the eyes and said, "Go away."

The arsonists were silent, but Mike whispered, "El?"

"Go *away*." El repeated, louder.

Papa spoke then. "No good will come of this, Jane."

"Who...?" Mike began, before he tried to stand up.

El really wanted to tell him not to, tell him to stop before he hurt himself, but she didn't want to turn around. She didn't want the arsonists to be able to catch her off-guard. She kept staring, biting her lip and trying to remain calm.

"I don't know what you think you've been doing," Papa continued, stepping forwards, "But your little game is getting tiring. You need to stop running from us, we're trying to help you like we always have."

"You *hurt* me." El said, spitting venom with every word. "You've always hurt me and I'm leaving. Go away."

"You must come back with us, Jane." Papa said, walking closer. El flinched back, almost stepping on Mike as she did. "You have been trained since birth to help our side. You know that we're right. This... *rebellious phase* can't last forever. You are one of us, and you always will be."

"No." El said. "No, *no*."

El felt a hand grab her arm, pushing her back slightly. Mike managed to shakily stand up next to her, suddenly getting a full view of the arsonists only a little bit away from them. He stared for a second, still shaking a lot and looking hurt, tears at the edge of his eyes, and then he said, "Get away from her."

Papa stared at Mike, coldly, as the rest of the Arsonists started to approach, too. El pushed Mike back slightly and threw her hand in front of him again, before yelling, "Go *away*!"

"Stop fighting, Jane-"

"*El!*" she yelled, fury in her eyes. "I'm *El!*"

Her mind immediately shifted into fighting mode. She had about five knives left on her person- one in each shoe, two in a pocket, one in her belt- not enough for each arsonist. She could duck and fight, she might be able to stab a few, but could she completely incapacitate them? She didn't know if she wanted to kill them, but she knew how to knock someone out quite well. But she also didn't want Papa around to hurt her... and she couldn't let them get to Mike.

That's when she spotted something, just behind the arsonists, almost obscured by the smoke.

And she smiled.

"El?" Mike asked, looking worriedly at the firestarters.

"My name is El." El said again, as loud as she dared. "You hurt me, you hurt my Mother, you hurt my sister, you hurt my friends. I'm not going to be like you. I'm not going to hurt people for you. I'm not going to hurt *anyone* ." Then, she narrowed her eyes and reached for the knife in her belt. "Except for you."

Papa narrowed his eyes. "Stand down-"

El looked at the smoke again, and then yelled, "Go!"

That's when Max and Nancy rushed out of the smoke and tackled two arsonists to the ground.

"What the-" one of them said, only for Dustin and Lucas to rush past, running as fast as they could.

Dustin got there first, and he quickly surveyed the situation. After a second, he said, "Mike, holy shit! Can you run?"

"Um..."

"Can you carry him?" El asked.

"Think I can, yeah." Dustin said. "Lucas, buddy system, you're with El. We have to go."

“How much of this fucking building is on fire?” Jonathan asked.

They’d managed to get down the building and turned the bend, only to see more smoke and flames.

“This is good, don’t worry.” Joyce said. “Means they’ve got one less HQ.”

“Mom...” Will said quietly, grabbing onto her arm.

She turned, seeing all the black cars parked just a few feet away. She swore under her breath and said, “Don’t worry. Our getaway is close-”

Two people rushed out of the forest, and Will jumped up instinctively, in case he needed to fight or run. To his relief, Joyce and Jonathan both called out.

“Funshine! Dottie!”

The two people rushed over, and Joyce said, “What’s going on?”

“What’s going on is we did our job.” Dottie said. “Got the explosives out of the way, and-” she paused, looking at Jonathan. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“Long story.” Jonathan said. “Where’s the car?”

“Mick and Axe should be nearby.” Funshine said. “Where’s Kali?”

“She’s getting Hop and Steve, they were-” Joyce began, only to hear a thud from the other side of the building, a loud curse. “Oh. There’s Steve.”

“Well, in that case, we better hurry and find Mick and Axel” Jonathan said. “And I better find the kids, they should be waiting for me out there.”

Almost on cue, Nancy rushed up from out of the forest, gripping onto Max’s hand. Behind them, the other kids ran up, with Dustin carrying Mike over his shoulders, the latter looking very pale, his arms and back clearly burnt. Lucas and El were holding hands, looking very

worried.

“We have to move!” Nancy said, rushing by. “We just majorly pissed off some arsonists!”

“Jesus, what the fuck happened?” Kali asked.

“Nance, what happened to you? Are you hurt?” Steve asked, noticing that Dustin’s jacket had been haphazardly tied around her side, which wasn’t a very good bandage, and everyone could clearly see she was bleeding.

“I’ll be alright, I’ve lost blood before.” Nancy shrugged. “But we have to move, where’s the goddamn car?”

“What happened to Mike?” Will asked, panicking upon seeing his friend.

“Burns.” El said simply, though she also looked quite worried.

Kali pulled out her radio, and said into it, “Axe, Mick, where the hell are you?”

After a second, there was a response. “Close by. Need a lift?”

“No, just calling to say hello.” Kali rolled her eyes. “We have extra passengers, the kids decided not to stay put. Think we can fit?”

“Won’t be comfortable.”

“Just get us the hell out of here.”

As soon as Kali lowered the radio, Dustin said, “You know, she’s not kidding. We’re being chased, we need to move.”

“Okay, down the street.” Kali said. “Hopper, you and Steve in front, me and Byers in the back, if we run into trouble, we’ll defend you. Alright?”

The kids nodded, and Jonathan managed to maneuver Will to the middle of the group as they started running.

El, meanwhile, waited a second, moving to the back with Kali. She turned to watch the fire spreading across headquarters, and then she said, "Papa's nearby."

Kali froze up a second, and then said, "Do you want to get rid of him?"

El paused, and then said, "No. We're leaving."

"He'll keep chasing us."

El looked around at the rest of the group, and then said, "If he does, we'll fight him again."

52. Getting from Point A to Point B

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Getting from Point A to Point B

The Gang's new van pulled up, and the kids let out a loud cheer.

"Jesus, don't do that!" Nancy yelled. "You're gonna give away our location."

"They're already chasing us." Max said. "Might as well have some fun."

Mick stopped the van, and said, "Door's unlocked, get in the back and hold on!"

Max leapt in first, as Axel turned around from the shotgun seat and asked, "What in the hell are you doing here?"

"Helping." Max said, helping Lucas in next.

Dustin carried Mike in before setting him up against the wall, saying, "Have you got any medication or anything? Nancy's bleeding and Mike's badly burned."

"There should be a first aid kit, in the second box, to the right." Mick said. "What happened?"

"Arsonists, who are on our tail right now." Kali said, pushing Nancy, Funshine and Dottie in ahead of her before jumping in. "We need to move- Steve, Hop, Byers, move your asses!"

"We're going as fast as we can, asshole!" Steve said, as he jumped in, holding out his hand to help Will and Jonathan in, followed closely by Joyce. When Hopper finally jumped in, lowering his gun and joining Kali in closing the doors, he said, "Alright, we're all here. Step on it, Mick!"

“Whoo, another car chase.” Mick said, as she hit the gas. “Nothing more relaxing than *this* .”

“Can the sarcasm, we need to focus.” Funshine said, as he pulled the First Aid Kit out of a box and passed it to Dustin. “Anyone else know first aid?”

“I do.” Hopper said.

Joyce nodded, too, before turning to Will. “Do you need more treatment for your burns?”

“I don’t think so.” Will muttered, as he leaned up against Jonathan.

“Nancy, you need a better bandage.” Steve said quickly.

“I’m fine, take care of Mike.” Nancy said quickly.

“We can multitask.” Dustin said. “Chief, Ms. Byers, get a bandage on Nancy, make sure her wound’s decently cleaned. Who knows how to deal with burns?”

“I do.” Funshine said.

“Standard Firestarter training.” Steve said. Dottie and Kali also nodded, and El raised her hand a bit.

“Okay, I don’t know a lot about that, so you’re gonna have to help.” Dustin said. “Mike, stay calm.”

Mike nodded a bit, staring at the wall.

“We need water first.” El said, and as Dottie grabbed a box to try and find some, she reached over to grab Mike’s hand.

“Are we being followed?” Max asked, jumping up and moving to look through the front windshield.

“Sit down.” Mick said. “I don’t see any cars, but that doesn’t mean we’re not being followed or tracked. Kal, do you think we should stop by the hotel?”

“A lot of our stuff is still there.” Jonathan said. “Our books, some clothes-”

“We’ve got a VFD book still there, *fuck*.” Lucas said.

Kali considered. “Do you still have a rope hanging from the window?”

“No.” Jonathan said. “We weren’t that dumb, we pulled it down and shoved it in the bushes.”

“How long would it take to grab your stuff?”

“Maybe five minutes, if the elevator’s not out of order.”

“I’d say we can probably try.” Kali said, “But if we see black cars parked outside, we’re not stopping.”

“To the hotel, then.” Mick said. “And then what?”

Kali paused, glancing at the full van, and then she said, “We relocate the kids.”

“Got it.” Mick said.

“Relocate?” Max asked.

Kali glanced at her. “I said we had a friend. We can find somewhere to put you. Hopefully she hasn’t moved since we last saw her.”

“Is she the one with the Sugar Bowl?” Lucas asked.

Kali nodded.

“Somewhere to put us?” Will repeated quietly, and then he looked up at Jonathan and Joyce, the latter of whom was bandaging Nancy. “Where are we going?”

“I... I dunno, bud.” Jonathan said quietly. “Somewhere safe. I promise, you’re not going back there. We’re safe now.”

Will bit his lip, before sighing slightly and leaning onto his brother some more. He watched carefully as the others worked to treat Mike.

El gripped Mike's hand and said, "You're gonna be okay."

Mike glanced up at her, and, very quietly, he said, "Tell me something?"

El smiled slightly, and she said, "We've got Will. We're going somewhere safe. We can look at the stars some more..."

Jonathan and Hopper ran into the hotel, grabbed their bags, and were out in less than five minutes.

"I don't think we can fit everyone in here." Axel said as they were passing bags in.

"Some of the ones who aren't sick could take another car," Kali said, " *But* I have a feeling they're not going to want to leave. Our friends shouldn't be far away, and you're up front so you don't have anything to complain about. It'll be a little cramped, but if we keep driving all night, we should make it fine."

"It'll be rough driving out of this town." Mick said. "Maybe we should take the train again."

"Can't take the chance Firestarters will be there." Kali said. "We'll have to risk driving. If we go through the woods, we should get to where we need to go before tomorrow afternoon."

"So long as nobody follows us, cause then we're all dead." Axel pointed out.

"We'll be dead," Mick said sharply, "If we crash and die because the only road out of this town hasn't been cleaned for years."

"We'll probably make it." Kali said. "And we can walk if the car starts to freak too much."

"The important thing," Steve said, "Is to not panic."

"Nobody's panicking." Dottie said.

"I am a little." Dustin said. "We're definitely being tracked, and what was that about crashing and dying?"

"Don't worry, we'll just lose whoever tries to follow us." Kali said. "Mick?"

"Fine, fine." Mick said. "Everyone in?"

They nodded and shut the doors, and she said, "Alright, we're gonna drive over the speed limit, so hold on."

Max was the only one who looked excited at this.

By the time Mick finally stopped the car, about halfway through the woods, they were pretty sure anyone who might be tracking them was pretty far away. At the very least, they had a few hours. At most, they'd lost their trackers.

"We need to fill up the gas tank." Mick said simply.

"Anyone need fresh air while we do that?" Kali asked, glancing around.

All of the kids but Will had passed out; Lucas, Max and Dustin had fallen asleep on each other, while El was leaning against Kali's shoulder, and Mike was leaning on hers, looking peaceful despite the fact he was heavily bandaged and probably still hurting. Nancy and Steve had also fallen asleep a little earlier, while the Gang and Hopper were still awake. Joyce paused, before saying, "Yeah, I... I think I'll go out for a bit."

Jonathan and Will glanced at each other, as Kali said, "Don't go far, Byers."

Joyce nodded, before opening the doors and walking out.

After a second, Jonathan said, "We'll go with her."

Him and Will jumped out, watching as their Mom walked over to a tree, fiddling her her jacket and staring into the night. Will paused,

before looking up at Jonathan, and slowly pulling out the file.

“What are we gonna do about this?” he asked.

Jonathan stared at him, and then he glanced towards his Mom again. And then he knew what he wanted to do, so long as his brother was up for it. Which he was.

“Mom?”

Joyce jumped, turning around. Jonathan and Will were looking up at her. “Is something wrong?” she asked quickly, glancing down at Will. “Are your burns getting worse, is-”

“No, no, we’re fine.” Will said. “We’re... we’re okay.”

“Good.” Joyce sighed.

The brothers glanced to each other, and then Jonathan said, “So... you were a Firestarter?”

Joyce flinched and glanced away, but nodded. “Yes. Switched sides when I was pretty young.”

“But you left.” Will said. “You left, and... and you didn’t let them take us.”

Joyce shook her head. “No, no, I... I left because I didn’t want you to be a part of this, and I should’ve told you *something* but I just... I just hoped that they’d all leave us alone.”

Jonathan slowly stepped forwards, showing her the file. “And this is... this is the stuff you did for them?”

“For both sides.” Joyce said quietly. “At least, I assume. The Firestarters tend to dislike information upkeep, but they’d probably have everything they can on their agents, especially ones that disappeared. So that they know who they’re fighting, or so they have enough information to blackmail. I’m surprised they didn’t try that on me.”

She took a breath, and then said, "And... and I meant what I said. You can read it. It's... it's fine."

Will paused, glancing at Jonathan, who nodded slightly. Will then reached into his pocket and pulled out a box of matches. Joyce jumped, scared, as he pulled a match out and lit it, and in a flash, Jonathan held out the file and let Will set it alight.

"What the-" Joyce began, watching as Will tossed the matchbox somewhere into the woods, before blowing the match out and throwing it as well. Jonathan waited until the file was burned enough before dropping it and stomping to put out the flames.

"I meant what I said, too." Jonathan said quietly, as he stared at the remains of the file. "It doesn't matter."

"We don't care what was in that file." Will said quietly. "We know who you are. You're our *Mom*. That's enough. And... I've had enough Firestarter bullshit to last me a lifetime."

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Will ran forwards and hugged his Mom. Joyce instantly hugged him back, and Jonathan joined in after a moment. Joyce really hoped they couldn't tell she was starting to cry.

"Wake up the kids," Funshine said quietly. "We're just about there."

Kali nodded, shaking El a bit. She sat up, almost instantly alert. She settled after a second, and Kali relayed the message, and then she moved to Mike, while Nancy started to wake up Jonathan and Will, and Hopper and Steve moved to the other kids. "Mike?" she asked.

Mike let out a low groan, before opening his eyes. "El?"

"We're here, wake up." she said quietly.

Mike glanced around, seeing everyone else sitting up and getting ready to leave, and tried to stand up, only to flinch and freeze.

"Still hurt?" El asked carefully. Mike nodded, shutting his eyes and

clenching his fists a little. "It's okay, I'll help."

"Does... does your leg still hurt?" Mike asked, glancing at the place she'd been hit with the throwing knife.

"I'll be fine." El said. She'd felt worse pain before.

She grabbed Mike's hand as Mick parked the car and said, "Okay, this shouldn't be dangerous, but just in case this building's been compromised, kids stay in the middle of the group. Hands on weapons, but don't pull them out unless we're attacked. If VFD shows up, kids should stick together, but if we're overpowered, go out the window and don't look back."

"I don't want to leave you guys again!" Will said quickly, sitting up straight. "I don't-"

"It probably won't happen, Byers." Kali said quickly, as Jonathan also grabbed his brother's arm comfortingly. "E's pretty good at keeping VFD the hell away from her."

El paused a second, looking up. "Who?"

Kali smiled a little, before pushing open the door. "Alright, everyone out."

The city was very bright, and they all had to take a moment to readjust once they stepped outside the car, with Mike and El leaning on each other. Mick had parked in an alley between two buildings, but looking to the side, everyone could tell they were in a very crowded city, which they also might have been able to figure out by just how loud it was.

"Are you sure this is the place?" Dustin asked, rubbing his eyes.

"Better be." Kali said, before going up to a door. She knocked, waited a moment, and then opened it anyway, calling, "Hey, we made it alive!"

Kali's gang quickly followed her, and after a second, El shrugged, and the group wandered in. As they walked, El once again did a quick mental count of her knives- she still had most of them, she thought,

she put them back on her person when she woke up. Max had her bat in hands, Lucas had his wrist-rocket in his pocket, and Hopper still had his gun. They were all armed, just in case.

The house looked like a normal office building, at least from the door they'd walked in from. They had wandered into some kind of waiting room, and Kali was trying to open the door on the wall opposite them. "Damn." she cursed.

"It's locked? Is that bad?" Lucas asked, while Joyce wandered over to the bookshelf, scanning the titles with a bit of concern.

"Not really, just means she's not up and moving yet." Kali said. "I would've thought-"

"Hold on." Nancy said. "What's that?"

They paused, hearing a noise from the floor above, almost like a creak.

"Fuck." Axel said.

Something snapped, and everyone instantly jumped away as a cloud of dust descended. El went into panic mode, pushing Mike back as far as she dared, stopping just short of the wall and grabbing one of her knives. Joyce immediately ran to her sons and dragged them back, while Hopper, Steve and Nancy stood just under the break, waiting to see what had happened.

El's first thought, after the panic died down, was, *At least the part of the ceiling that fell wasn't on fire.*

Part of the roof had fallen, though not much. It was just enough that a teenage girl was hanging upside-down from a hole, her foot stuck inbetween two of the broken boards. She looked quite upset, and after a second, she said, "Sorry. This building's just a bit too old, ya know?"

Kali and the Gang looked very confused, while the Party just glanced at each other, stunned.

Then the girl turned around, managing to spot Steve and Nancy. Her

eyes lit up, and she said, “Hi, Steve!”

Steve paused for a second, and then smirked, looking ready to burst into laughter. “Hey, Robin!”

Robin opened her mouth to say something else, and then she heard another creak. “Shit.” she said, as she fell from the ceiling, landing on the floor with a thud. Everyone stared at her, as she sat up, shook her head, and said, “Goddamnit. Not a very graceful landing, was that?”

After a moment, Will very kindly said, “Who the *hell* are you?”

Notes for the Chapter:

... i hope to God that Robin isn't secretly a villain next season, otherwise I'm gonna have to come back and rewrite this chapter

53. Robin attempts to do Someone Else's Job

Notes for the Chapter:

Let's play a game of "how many references can I make to ASOUE, ATWQ, and a certain Stephen King book, all in one chapter?"

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Robin attempts to do Someone Else's Job

"Sorry, sorry." Robin said, jumping up and running a hand through her short blonde hair. "House is super old, and I've only been here a few days. I didn't know you guys would be in before- oh, I guess it doesn't matter. I'm Robin."

"You were sending Kali telegrams." Max said, remembering first.

"Yeah, I was a spy for a bit." Robin said, brushing dust off her pants, "But unfortunately I got found out. VFD went on high alert after they lost *four* kids, and they figured out I was using the telegram office when I shouldn't be. So I told them to fuck off and jumped out a window, which is something I've wanted to do for a while. Glad to see none of you got caught- you are the kids, right?"

They nodded. "Robin, where's E?" Kali asked. "We sent her a message-"

"Oh, she said she's very sorry, but something very important came up." Robin said.

"Very important?" Kali asked skeptically.

"Yeah." Robin said, moving towards the door Kali had been trying to unlock and pulling a key out of her pocket. "I didn't catch all of it, but apparently some... seven or eight kids in Maine went wild and torched some VFD bases. We think they're on the run, so we have to go get them before they get themselves into more shit. And on the

way there, E's gotta check our Ohio base, we completely lost contact with Andy and Vicky. So she'll be gone for a while."

"What happened to Andy and Vicky?" Kali asked.

"Dunno, like I said, we lost contact." Robin said, finally pushing the door open and gesturing into a blank hallway. "Follow me."

Kali nodded to her Gang, and they remained in the room while everyone else followed Robin. "They're gonna stay to guard." Nancy whispered to Mike and El, who watched them, confused. "That's what they do, always leave someone by the door."

As they walked into the hall, El said, "We'd do that."

"Always have someone awake while everyone else sleeps." Lucas said.

"Anyway," Robin continued, a bit loudly, "We think it was Firestarters, one of our other agents says they want their kid for the Phoenix shit."

El jumped, and Kali said, "Well, sucks that E's not here. I wanted her to meet my sister."

"Huh?" Robin turned, following Kali's gaze towards El. "Oh! Oh, hi! Phoenix kid?"

"Not anymore." El said simply. "I'm El."

Robin laughed a little, before pushing open a door and walking in. It was pretty big, with a large map spread across one wall, multicolored pins covering it. Robin moved over to a desk in the corner, standing on a swivel chair to grab at a binder on the top shelf. Steve instantly ran over to hold it for her before she could fall.

"El. That's nice." Robin said. "Anyway, I'll see if we have files for you guys yet. We still have some safe cities registered."

"Safe cities?" Joyce asked, as she moved to inspect the map. Most of the group followed her, trying to make sense of the pins.

“Holy shit, is that Byers?” Robin asked, glancing over her shoulder.

“Long story, but yes.” Kali said. “She’s with us. Those are her sons.”

“Hi.” Will said, as Jonathan waved.

“Well, alright.” Robin said. “Seen weirder shit. Anyway, Safe Cities are cleared of VFD. There are some cities they won’t go to cause of failed missions, some that have too many people who give a shit about kidnapped kids, some that are just hard for them to set up shop in. E’s mainly in charge of this, though she mostly just does her investigative journalism thing, while Kal and her crew take down HQs. I *was* a spy, but that didn’t pan out, so she’s gonna find somewhere to put me once she deals with- *shit*.”

Robin dropped the binder, and it landed on the floor, papers spilling out. Steve picked it up quickly, as Robin jumped off the chair.

“How do you know Steve?” Jonathan asked carefully.

“We were undercover at the same time at a store once- for both sides, it got very complicated.” Robin said. “I kinda introduced him and Nancy to Kal.”

“Speaking of which, we ditched VFD, too.” Steve said.

“Good for you.” Robin said, taking the binder from him and flipping through it. “Right, safe cities, safe cities...”

“What do the pins mean?” Mike asked carefully.

“Oh, the red ones are bad places.” Robin said. “That should be easy to figure out, it’s Firestarter HQs, Firestarter-filled towns, et cetera. The blue pins are also bad places, but for Firefighter places. Yellow pins are places under question, green have both sides present, white are known safe places. We put a new blue pin up by Hawkins after we found out what happened.”

“There’s Sherwood.” Dustin said, noticing a yellow pin. “Damn, they took us far from home.”

“There’s the place Billy was.” Max said, pointing to a red pin.

“Stain’d.” El said, pointing to a white marker.

“I was there.” Will said after a second, pointing to a blue marker. “And there.” Another Blue. “And there.” A Yellow. “And there.” A Red. He paused, then looked at a yellow marker, under a lake. “I was almost there.”

“Good thing you weren’t.” Nancy said. “That place is *infested* with-”

“Volunteers?” Jonathan asked.

She shook her head. “Leeches. But them, too.”

“And you should have a pin by Beaumont.” Will said. “J said he’s positioned there.”

“Beaumont, got it.” Robin muttered, making a mental note.

“Why does that place have three red pins?” Max asked, gesturing to a place near the coast.

“Long story, involving a hotel, a harpoon gun, and a guy we’re not allowed to talk about.” Robin said, still flipping through papers. “Kal, you run into any more Phoenix kids while you were out?”

“There aren’t any more.” El piped up, turning around. “I’m the last.”

“Are you sure?” Hopper asked, glancing to the kid skeptically.

“There were eleven.” El said simply. “I was the last. I remember, they used to bring us together.”

“For testing.” Kali added. “I don’t remember anyone younger than... than *El*. They would train us together when people stopped looking for us, or at least try to, a lot of the kids aren’t... around anymore.”

“Well, maybe they just stopped training you together.” Robin said. “And there’s more-”

“Robin,” Steve said carefully. “Not comforting.”

“Just being realistic.” she said.

El did glance over to Kali worriedly, and she said, “Don’t worry, we’ll track down Brenner eventually and burn all the Phoenix Headquarters.”

“They, uh... they wanted me for that.” Will admitted after a second. “The Phoenix thing. But I got out.”

“Good for you, a lotta kids didn’t.” Robin said. “Ah! Found a file for the Hawkins kids. Says here that she was hoping to put you- huh, she actually wanted you guys in Stain’d.”

“Really?” El looked up, excited.

“Are you telling me,” Max said, turning around sharply, “That this ‘E’ girl wanted us all to live in that broken-down shack?”

“Well, she probably wouldn’t have put you in Handkerchief Heights specifically.” Robin shrugged. “There’s tons of buildings in town. It’s gotten a bit crowded since the invisible ink industry began, but that just means you’ll blend in more.”

“How crowded?” Jonathan asked, sounding a bit concerned.

“Uh, not, like, big-city crowded or anything.” Robin said. “But it’s definitely not dying anymore. You might have trouble getting into the schools and stuff.”

“That’s fine.” El said very quickly.

“And VFD won’t dare touch the place.” Robin said. “Due to events that shall not be named. Also due to the fact that their newspaper takes no bullshit.”

“That definitely sounds good.” Nancy said.

“Great! You can take the train-” Robin began.

“No.” Mike, El, Lucas, Max and Dustin all said at the same time.

Will jumped, turning to them. “Sorry, why do we hate trains now?”

“Had to jump off one.” Lucas said.

Will paused for a second, and then said, "That... *why?*"

"We also aren't good with Libraries anymore." Dustin said.

"I mean, I guess-" Will started.

"Also," Max said, smiling, "I got to steal a truck."

"For *real?*"

"Yeah, and she's never doing it again." Mike said, sitting under the map and leaning against the wall. "That was scarier than when I got set on fire yesterday."

"Ha ha, Wheeler, I saved your asses." Max rolled her eyes.

"What'd you do, Will?" Dustin asked.

"Well, had to resist brainwashing for a week, learned how to climb and pick locks, also got kidnapped again by arsonists and watched some people die."

"Hmm, doesn't sound like fun."

"Can we not talk about this?" Lucas asked.

"Yeah," Nancy said, "I'm not sure you guys are processing this well."

"We're processing *great* ." Max said.

"Are you absolutely sure VFD won't find us there?" Joyce asked.

"Oh, yeah. They're avoiding that town like the plague." Robin said. "I mean, *technically* , you can never be sure of anything, so you can take extra precautions. We can get you fake names-"

"Please don't." Steve said. "I can barely remember everyone's names right now, how am I supposed to remember *two* names for everyone?"

"People will be looking for you." Kali said.

"Stain'd is pretty far from Hawkins." Lucas said. "People might not

know anything about us over there.”

“And if we keep our heads down for long enough, we should be fine.” Joyce said. “I mean, I used my real name as an apprentice as soon as people stopped looking for me, nobody really noticed.”

Robin said, “E said she’ll call in every afternoon so I know she’s not dead, I can ask her if it’s okay to move ahead with the plan for you all- who knows, she might not have been expecting so goddamn many of you.”

“Well, not all of us will be staying there.” Kali said, which earned her a worried glance from El.

“Okay, uh, how about you all settle in upstairs,” Robin said, “And you all figure out how many of you we’ll need to house in Stain’d? I can’t exactly get food for all of you right now but you can probably go out to a restaurant, we’ve got some emergency money in the drawers. Just don’t eat the salmon.”

“Sounds alright.” Kali said. “I’ll check in on the gang, the rest of you figure out what we’re going to do. And Robin, can you help Mike and Nancy? They’re kinda wounded.”

“Did you seriously just ask me for medical help?” Robin asked, staring at her blankly.

Kali paused, and then said, “You’re right, we’re not repeating that mistake. Hop, Steve, Byers, you’re in charge.”

“What is this building for?” Max asked curiously as she sat on the floor.

They’d found a room that looked a bit more comfortable than the others, with no meeting tables or wooden desks. There was a bookshelf in the corner, a nice carpet, and a couch that Mike and Nancy were sitting on while Joyce re-did Nancy’s bandage and Steve checked over Mike’s burns. The kids all sat as close to Mike as they could, to the point where Steve had to ask them to scoot away slightly so they didn’t crowd him. Will kept glancing between Mike

and his Mom, while he sat inbetween Dustin and Max and occasionally rested his head on one of their shoulders, looking exhausted.

“It used to be an office building, clearly.” Robin said, as she grabbed a book off the shelf. “But the business got shut down and we managed to buy it. E hides her journalism work here, and it also doubles as our HQ for getting people out of VFD.”

“How many people have you gotten out?” Joyce asked, looking up cautiously.

“We don’t keep many records, just enough so we know where everyone is in case VFD gets near them.” Robin said. “But, well, we haven’t gotten a lot. We’re a secret organization bent on taking down a secret organization. So only a few people know we exist. The worst thing that could happen would be VFD figuring out what we’re doing and where we are. But we’re making progress. Hopefully the main Firestarters and Firefighters will wipe each other out while we get as many innocents out as we can.”

“VFD’s lasted a real long time, though.” Will said, only just loud enough for them to hear. “Do you really think you can dismantle it?”

“It’s only lasted so long cause it didn’t start out, well, this *bad* . And the schism began a few decades ago; before that it was a more organized cult.” Nancy explained. “That’s certainly complicating matters.”

“Anyway, I’m gonna leave you to it.” Robin said, pocketing the book she’d grabbed. “I’ve got some work to do.”

“I thought you hated work.” Steve said, almost jokingly.

Robin smirked at him. “I hated working at a *store* . This is way more interesting.”

She left, then, giving them a quick wave. Once the door closed, Dustin was the first to speak up. “So, we clearly can’t go back to Hawkins.” He gestured to him and the other kids.

“And El’s definitely coming with us, she can’t get caught up in the

Phoenix program again.” Max said, and El nodded.

“I’m not leaving Will.” Jonathan said quickly. “I’m not leaving any of the kids.”

“I’m definitely not letting you all run around on your own.” Joyce said. “Besides, VFD’s probably after me just as much as you by this point.”

“Yeah, you did just burn down one of their HQs.” Nancy said.

“Two.” Joyce reminded her. “As well as at least one person.”

“Sorry, what?” Lucas asked.

“Are...” Jonathan interrupted, turning to Nancy. “Are you coming? Cause, if you and Steve wanna go with Kali-”

“I think,” Nancy interrupted, giving him a significant look, “I could use a break from VFD for a while. Besides,” she glanced over at Mike, smiling slightly, “I’ve got a baby brother now.”

“Don’t you dare call me that.” Mike said, giving her a glare. “I’m thirteen.”

“You’re a baby.”

“I will murder you.”

“Good luck with that, kid.”

“And I’d rather stick with you guys.” Steve said. “I haven’t... haven’t really experienced anything outside VFD yet, this might be... you know, interesting.”

“Cool, you can be our new older brother.” Dustin said.

Steve gave the kid a look, saying, “Absolutely not.”

Slowly, Joyce turned to Hopper, and said, “Hop, you’ve probably gotta, you know, go back to Hawkins.”

They turned to him, as he said, “Well, I’ll have to drop you off at

Stain'd, make sure everything's alright there, and then-

"You can go back." Joyce said simply. "You can go back and tell everyone Jonathan and I disappeared, that you came back to get more information. After a while, let the case die."

"And," Lucas said, looking up, "When you go back, can you... can I write a letter? To my parents, and my sister? I... I need them to know I'm okay."

"They're in VFD, kid." Steve said.

"I'm not gonna tell them where we are." Lucas said quickly. "Or who's helping me- hell, you don't even have to deliver the letter in person, Chief, just shove it into the mailbox. I just... Nancy said they're not active, they might be worried about me. And Erica definitely is, she probably has no idea what's going on, and I don't know if I'll see her again..."

Max leaned over to grab his hand, while Dustin said, "That's not a bad idea. I'd like to tell my Mom something, *anything* . She's definitely worried sick."

"I... I might want to try that, too." Mike said carefully, glancing at Nancy.

"I probably should not, because my letter would just say 'fuck you.'" Max said. "But I can help you guys with yours."

"You probably should try." Will said. "They might be worried."

"Doubt it." Max muttered.

"Check those drawers for paper and pens." Jonathan suggested.

"And I can tell Robin who's staying." Steve said.

El stood up suddenly, and then said, "I... I'm gonna go find Kali."

"Wait-" Mike began.

"Go ahead." Joyce said, as Mike shrank a bit. "Just don't wander off."

"I'll come back." El nodded, smiling a bit at the kids, before she rushed off.

"You're not staying?"

Kali sighed and leaned against the wall, looking ahead at her Gang, who were playing cards by the door. "I can't just leave them. And I can't just sit around when VFD's still running. I've got to do something, you know?"

El nodded, a bit sadly.

"You can come, you know." Kali said hesitantly.

"I can't leave my friends either." El said. "Especially Mike. He's hurt."

"They all are, in different ways." Kali said. "They'll be upset for a while, probably having lingering paranoia, fear of betrayal and open windows, distrust of people, dislike of anything that could possibly relate to the Volunteers... we were the same way." She gestured to her Gang. "You probably will be, too."

"How do we stop it?"

"It never really stops, at least not from what I know." Kali admitted. "But you can be there for each other. It's a lot easier to figure out how life is supposed to go when you've got other people to figure it out with." She sighed. "God, I sound like a motivational poster."

"So you're leaving soon?"

"Probably tonight. We'll find a ride, you guys can have the van." Kali said. "We're not attached to it."

El looked up at her sister, hoping she didn't notice tears in her eyes. "Will you visit?"

Kali glanced at her, hesitated, and then gave her a quick hug. "Of course." she said softly. "Gotta make sure my sister's okay."

“One more question?” El asked, after a second.

“What?”

El smiled slightly. “Is E who I think she is?”

“That depends.” Kali said back, giggling a little. “What’s your new name again?”

“It can mean different things.” El admitted. She pulled away from the hug, and then said, “So. I’ll see you in Stain’d.”

Kali smirked. “See you in Stain’d.”

54. The Party writes some Letters Home [feat. foreshadowing]

Notes for the Chapter:

hmm... the final chapters of my fic tend to have author's notes describing what my next fic will be...

hmm...

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

The Party writes some Letters Home [feat. foreshadowing]

Hopper showed up back in Hawkins, almost two weeks after he disappeared. All everybody could get out of him was that the Byers were under the assumption that Will's father had kidnapped the kids for some reason, and then they all disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Several people grilled him, some out of curiosity, some out of fear he might know too much. He said nothing, but occasionally threw in a remark on where the Byers may have gone. They were all wildly different locations, but all very far from a small town near a drained lake.

He got a message the week after he got back in town. It was snuck into his mailbox with no return address, and written entirely in code. He stayed up all night translating it, with the codebook he'd taken with him.

Joyce said hello, said the kids were settling in well, that they had enough books to use to keep learning, and they had plenty of company with each other. Mike and Will's burns were healing, especially since they finally took them to a doctor, who accepted their excuse of a house fire. ("That's why we moved to Stain'd, our old house caught fire when we knocked down a candle. Tragic, really.") Jonathan and Nancy got a job at the newspaper, while Joyce herself got another job as a cashier. Steve was mostly in charge of making sure the kids didn't wander off or cause a ruckus, which was

easier said than done. Apparently Dustin and Max thought it was fun to run around town and figure out exactly how it worked, Mike and El were constantly trying new science experiments in the living room, Will had taken to re-painting the entire house, and Lucas and Max had practically moved into some abandoned coffee shop. Joyce added, as an afterthought, that they were still getting used to their new lives. It wasn't perfect, not yet; the kids often woke up screaming, they refused to sleep in a separate room, and Will apparently had a lot of anxiety while Joyce and Jonathan were gone.

"And, no, VFD can't track this message." was the final paragraph. "At least unless one of them gets to the post office before you. Robin's surprisingly good with these messages, Steve told us, and she'll be able to make sure it gets through okay. Once again, I can't thank you enough for doing all of this for us. Let us know if you need anything, and let us know if you need to make a delivery. I hope to see you soon. - Joyce."

If you need to make a delivery. He hadn't needed that, not yet. At least, none of the families had gotten back to him. But they'd all gotten the letters. He knew they had.

The letters all started out the same.

Dear Parents,

We are safe, we are alive, and we are together. We cannot come home, because Hawkins is too dangerous for us. [For every letter but Dustin's, there was the following line: I think you know why.] We will be fine, though. We're somewhere we can call home, we're with friends, and hopefully we can make a life on our own. Maybe we'll see you when we're adults, just know now that we are in less danger here than we would be if we returned home.

They diverged after that. Dustin's letter was the simplest.

I went missing because of something Dad did. I know you're worried, and I miss you so much. I'll see if I can send you updates every now and again. Maybe in a while I can visit, or you can even come to where I am; we're hoping to be able to bring you to us as soon as we've settled into our new place and we're sure it's safe. But Hawkins is dangerous, there are eyes and ears everywhere, and if they know you know where I am, you could be in danger, too.

Take good care of Mews, and if you need anything, the Chief can help you. Please don't show this letter to anybody else; destroy it if you can. We can't have anybody knowing where I am. I'm sorry for being so cryptic, but it's the best I can do.

Just know that I'm with my friends, and that I think I can be happy soon.

- Dusty

Max's was probably the most bitter.

You know exactly why I'm gone. I don't know how much you both know about each other, about Billy, about my recruitment, about my Dad, but just know that I don't think I can see you again, at least not for a long while.

I'm with my friends- you know, the ones you hated. We got kidnapped together, so we're kind of ride-or-die now. I've got a new friend, too. She likes dresses more than me, so maybe Mom would like her. Although, she could kick all of our asses if she wanted, and keeps carrying knives with her, so you guys would still probably hate her. Anyway, we're having fun now, which is good, because we spent about a week running through hell.

Oh, also, I stole a car. And I drove it through a fence. It was awesome.

- Max

Lucas spent over an hour on his, trying to find just the right words.

They don't have me. I got out. We all got out together, and we're somewhere where they can't find us. I'm not really sure where we're going, or what we're going to do when we get there. But I know we'll be together. And it does seem to be a safe place, at least for a while. And I've got people who can protect me, and who I can help protect. We're going to be fine.

To Erica: This is probably very confusing and scary. I can't explain much in this letter, in case it's intercepted. But one day things will make sense; someday I'll see you again, I know it. I'll come see you when I'm an adult and no longer valuable to the people who tried to take me away, or maybe you'll find me. I think if you need to find me, you will. You're brave and strong. Uh, not sure what else to say. Some older brother messages maybe? Don't let anyone push you around or make you feel like shit. Stand up for yourself. Learn self-defense, just in case. Get what you want out of life. And, for the record, everytime I said I hated you, or that you were annoying, I didn't mean it. I miss you. I love you.

To Mom and Dad: I will repeat, they don't have me. We're not sure how involved you are with them anymore, but don't let them tell you I'm with them. I'm free. I can't be a part of this, no matter how noble they think they are. I miss you, and please don't worry about me; I swear I am safe, as long as I have my friends. And if you think they're going to come for Erica, take her to Hopper. He doesn't know enough to be dangerous to you or them, I swear, but he'll protect her. Just please don't put her through this, too. Please keep her safe. I love you so much. I hope I'll see you soon. I love you.

Lucas

Mike was the last one to get his letter done, mostly because he was working on it with his sister. It was technically addressed to both his parents, but Mike had seemed pretty convinced that only his Mom would read it.

You're not going to believe this, but I found Nancy. She's keeping us safe. She went through... quite a childhood. Switched sides a bit. But she's with us now, she's free. She says Hi, and also thinks it's nice you kept her room. She wants to know if you can say hi to Barb, the girl she used to play with. Is she still in Hawkins? I have to admit I don't know, I only really payed attention to the kids in my year.

I've gotten a bit hurt, but it's not too bad. I'm getting better, and Nancy says I'll probably heal fast. I am with my friends, and with safe adults, I promise. I even have some new friends. There's one my age, she's amazing, but Nancy says I'm not allowed to talk about her, just in case someone intercepts this letter. There's also some of Nancy's friends, they're pretty cool.

We talked to Ms. Byers. She told us some stuff about you, and we want to say we get it. You didn't know what you were getting into, they got Ms. Byers that way, they got Nancy and her friends, they almost got us. And... thank you so much for the book. I love you, Mom, and I'm sorry that I probably won't be able to contact you soon. But I am safe.

Lucas had a good idea, and he probably won't mind if we use it. If they get interested in Holly, which they might, take her to the only other person who was with us; I think you can figure out who they are pretty fast. Don't let them get to her. Hell, if you ever want to leave, you can come with her. We won't mind. It would be nice to see you again.

See you someday, Mike (and Nancy)

Hopper knew the parents had received the letters, because they'd stopped being so worried. Claudia came to him on occasion, and while he couldn't say much, he did assure her that Dustin was alright, and they'd see if they could reunite them soon. The Sinclairs seemed almost at peace somehow, the few times he saw them passing through town. And he supposed that Erica took Lucas's advice to heart, because she got pulled into the station the other day for fistfighting a kid who was picking on her. He wasn't sure how the Hargroves reacted, cause he hadn't seen them in a while, but it

wasn't as if he cared much for Neil in the first place. He worried about Susan sometimes, but he thought she was probably alright at the moment. Hopefully she'd leave soon, get away from Neil and find somewhere safe to go.

He found himself missing the whole Party a bit more than he thought. Mostly Joyce and Jonathan, who he'd spent the most time with. But it didn't matter. They had to stay safe, and he couldn't just up and visit them. If he was followed to Stain'd, VFD might overcome their distaste for the place, and he couldn't risk the kids like that.

So it was good to know they were all safe.

At least for now.

Black Cat Coffee was quiet.

Dustin and Will were drawing in the corner, sketching out some ideas for the bedroom walls they'd had, while Joyce sat nearby, going over something in a book and occasionally assisting with a small suggestion. Lucas and Max were sitting by the counter, having finally grown tired of pressing the C button to see how much coffee the machine could make. They were holding hands and staring out the window, and after a second, Max leaned her head on his shoulder. Nancy, Steve and Jonathan were playing cards in the corner, with their spyglasses between them. (Joyce had been surprisingly calm when they'd admitted they'd been teaching Jonathan some things, and she'd suggested teaching the kids some of it, too, just in case.) After a second, Nancy moved a bit closer to Jonathan, giving him a quick smile.

Up in the attic, meanwhile, Mike and El had found several packages. Well, they'd found them a few days before, and when they weren't moved after a few days, like most of the packages in the attic, they'd opened them. Most of it wasn't that interesting, but when El pulled out a makeup kit, Mike and her had decided to try it out.

"Hold still." Mike said, struggling with the blender as he tried to do her makeup.

“Sorry.” she said quietly. “I usually put it on myself.”

“Oh, yeah, I bet you got trained in this.” Mike said. “You’re good at it, then?”

“Not really.” she smiled, giggling a little.

“I said hold still.” Mike said, but he was laughing, too.

They jumped when they heard the phone ring downstairs. “Does anyone have this cafe’s number?” Mike asked, lowering his voice.

El shrugged, and they shut the makeup kit, running down the stairs. Everybody else was staring at the phone with slight fear, and Nancy finally stood up to answer, after shooting Mike and El a look. “Black Cat Coffee.” she said, in a slightly higher voice than normal.

“Who is it?” Max asked, sounding half-asleep.

Nancy held up a finger, and then said, “How loud is it where you are?” She held her breath, and then sighed with relief. “Oh, good, so you’re just checking in? Alright. Yeah. Yeah, the house is great! We wanted to get coffee, so we’re here. Sorry if we scared you.” She paused. “Are we in trouble? No? You just... I mean, yeah, we definitely have room, we can take a couple more kids, how many...” after a second, her eyes widened, and her face fell into shock. “*Seven to Ten?* Depending on- how did you get...”

There was a long pause, as everyone glanced to each other.

Then Nancy said, “Sorry. *What* happened in Maine?”

Notes for the Chapter:

You know how this fic was based off a gifset?

Isn't it interesting how I have a similar, slightly older gifset in the same edit meme I did a while ago?
[<https://whencartoonsruletheworld.tumblr.com/post/169792865142/>]

I won't be uploading it right away, but, well, keep

eyes out for a semi-sequel (same universe, possibly connecting later) entitled "Melting the Chains."

Thanks so much for all your comments, love you!

- Midas